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Martin O'Rourke : Hall

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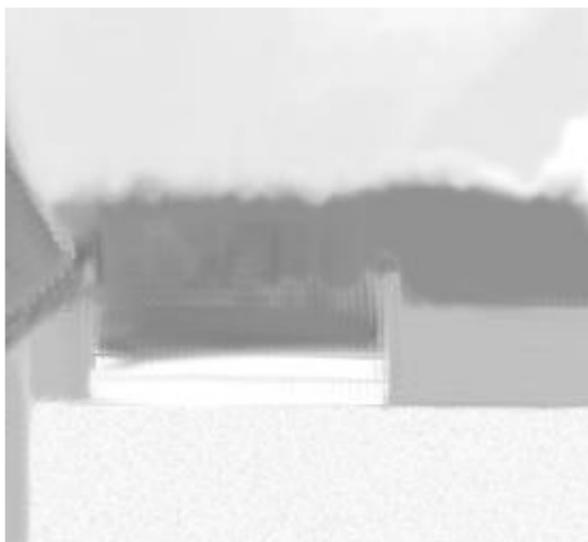
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Martin O'Rourke

# HALL



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"Every day another liar,  
Here comes another thief,  
Prepare yourself for much more sorrow,  
Depend on much more grief".

**Jahred Shaine, 2000**



## chapter one

Alicia Debenhauer had never forgotten the inexplicably intense interest that had been shaken erupt in her during the last English class before Spring Break 2001. In amongst the boring Shakespeare plays, and the monotonous poems about lakes and trees, she had usually regarded the daily forty-minute sessions with little more than complete disdain. Yet even she had to admit that there was something about the skinny substitute teacher from England, with her gloriously accurate accent, her ankle-length tartan skirts, and the pecky mannerisms she slipped in while attempting to share her love of the language with a bunch of semi-hostile dumb American teenagers. Ever since her arrival just after Christmas, Miss Adams had silently commanded the kind of enthused attention normally reserved for sixth graders in their sex education classes. Sure, she was attractive, enough to combine smoothly with her mesmerising speaking patterns to secure the undivided lustful yearnings of the boys in the room. It wasn't as if she would have to worry about any other serious contenders for the honour of most fuckable teacher in the school. And the mystic distance of her homeland – alongside an unashamed but subtle flaunting of her own cultural and national pride – was sufficient to earn the reluctantly awed respect of most of the girls. But Alicia had quickly lost interest in Miss Adams' style, seeing through the quaint authenticity of having an Englishwoman teaching them English, and calling her out as being no less boring than any of her predecessors.

To her surprise, Alicia found herself completely fixated by a concept that Miss Adams introduced her to on that humid February afternoon in room 7G. Even the sound of the words begged her consideration. *Pathetic fallacy*. "The poetic ideal of nature, in her own varying ways, appearing to reflect the very mental state of a poet or writer at a particular time", as the smiling teacher had explained. It seemed to bear such a sad, mournful name. What was pathetic about it? Why should it be made to sound like such a bad thing? Miss Adams' response had been something along the lines of it being used ordinarily, and mostly, when the writer is reflecting on miserable weather matching his miserable mood. But Alicia pressed on, ignoring the bemused reactions of her classmates, who were not used to hearing the loner engaging anybody in such lively debate. Surely the suggestion of something as powerful as the weather being able to harness itself to present such a vivid mirroring of an individual's mood demanded a title more suited than *pathetic fallacy*? Eventually, Miss Adams agreed that it probably wasn't the best descriptive title, and set Alicia the task of devising her own suitable phrase.

Now, on a scorching May morning, with the fierce sun piercing through the tall tired trees at the edge of the recreational fields, Alicia sat awkwardly at the staggered entrance to the basketball courts. Completely oblivious to the clanging bells that announced the end of the second-to-last morning period, already content that her unobscured vantage point was reasonably hidden from the sweeping sight of nosy bastard teachers. If they saw her, or came looking for her, screw them. She was going nowhere. And fuck Kate Adams. And her stupid bullshit pathetic fallacy crap. The burning sunshine, the twittering birds and the heavy pollen air could not have been any further from her present state of mind if they fucking tried.

She had already filed the day under failure by the time she had pushed her way through the swinging glass doors at the top of the school steps. Her father had given another dose of his repetitive breakfast lectures, some shit about the new purple streaks in her recently braided hair. What the shit did he know about her, or what she was into? He looked twice as ridiculous as she ever would, tight Hawaiian floral print shirts stretching bitterly over his ever-expanding beer gut. They had already danced around the weekly subject of her short black skirt, which apparently looked all the more “slutty” whenever she wore her matching coloured knee socks. There was nothing wrong with her legs – in fact, she was damn proud of the tanned hue they had retained from the three sun soaked months she had spent with the Graysons in Fort Lauderdale two years ago. His prophetic claims that the school would eventually find fault with her risqué attire fell on deafer ears, as they had, despite much promise, never been followed through by any authority figures at Allenglade High. It’s not as if they could – the blue and yellow cheerleader uniforms, often sported with more regularity in the corridors between classes than on the football field, were much shorter than anything Alicia could care to wear. And if they did decide to complain, fuck them. She had already given in over the piercings in her nose and under her lip. But only under threat of suspension, and the severance of her lousy allowance. The damn holes had closed over soon after, leaving her with a thirty-dollar hole in her savings, and nothing to show for it.

The 2522 bus had left by the time she made it to the stop, leaving her with a twenty-minute walk to complete in fifteen if she wanted to steer clear of another tardy slip. She got there just as the bell finished ringing, earning a half-mocking tut-tut from the old bat standing at the door. The first period class was History, with Dusty Donovan neglecting to bother with the kind of cheerful comments that staff members usually made to ease their students back into

another working week. If asked, the retirement-aged teacher would have outlined his inability to deduce the point in wasting five minutes in asking how the ball games had gone, or who had seen what at the movies. Instead, he frowned at the three empty seats in his room, demanded that those present open their textbooks at page 114, and recommended that they make a note of the impending examination. As one, the class groaned, prompting the smug old man to remind them that he had postponed it from the semester just finished. Alicia scribbled the time and date onto the back cover of her book, and flicked back in worried haste to compute the number of chapters that she had forgotten to revise.

Ricky Bower was pretty much the only senior who had ever had anything kind or complimentary to say to Alicia in the halls of Allenglade High. Everybody else seemed to hold her in the same misunderstood contempt that her own classmates adopted. But Ricky was like her, different. It had all started when he'd passed a favourable comment concerning her Sin Sister tour shirt – a miserable mail-ordered consolation, considering that she had been locked in her upstairs bedroom on the night her favourite band had rolled into town. Her parents were not at all confident about their daughter's willingness to obey their swift and strict response to her request to be allowed go and see some noisy bunch of freaks at the Civic Theater – on a school night, no less. So they took drastic action of the imprisonment kind. From her window, she had been able to make out the swirling police helicopters in the distance, ducking and diving in precautionary manoeuvres, ready and willing to pounce should America's most dangerous band – or their fans – try anything funny.

It was with this sad tale of brutal parenting that she followed up Ricky's initial appraisal of the "Black Stars & Blacker Stripes" T-shirt. Immediately noticing the bright shine in the clear blue eyes of the impressionable younger kid, Ricky launched into his own account of the hallowed night. The band had been on fire, he reckoned, and frontman Malik had never sounded better. He moaned about the cops and conservative America as a whole, practically parroting the words that Malik had stirred the crowds with. Alicia listened in hushed tones, looking deep into the dopey eyes of the older boy, enjoying a sizeable rush of excitement as she contemplated the very idea of finding an ally in this academic hellhole. Their week-long big-dog-little-dog relationship grew to include them enjoying occasional lunches together, with Alicia grasping the brief opportunity to trade tapes, getting her hands on some extremely rare shit, and being introduced to new and fresh bands. Once, having rushed their lousy sandwiches and darted at his suggestion through the sunshine to the steps by the basketball courts, he

pulled a long, white rolled cigarette from his black shirt pocket, and offered her her first taste of pot. While he lay back lazily against the wire mesh fence, content that there weren't any cop-friendly bozos around, she toked on the sweet-smelling joint. Being unused to smoking, she coughed and spluttered, eventually settling to consider the dizzy cloud that engulfed her head. Later still, as their hands brushed while he adjusted his sitting position, he took her hand in his, raised it to her cheek, and followed with his face. Kissing her heavily on the lips, his tongue warm and thick in her already-crowded mouth. In the days that remained of their friendship, neither mentioned the kiss. She didn't, because she didn't know how to.

She held out patiently, waiting for him to make a further move, or at least for the invitation to go check out his fledgling band while they practiced. But neither conversation materialised. Because one week to the day after their initial contact, Ricky was spotted strolling hand in hand through the corridor with some anorexic bitch dolled up like fucking Elmyra, or something. Nothing more than the tiniest of nods for Alicia as they swept past her locker. Had she managed to pull herself from the silent pain-addled depths that she instantly plummeted towards, she could have easily learned that Ricky's "new" woman was in fact his girlfriend of three years, who had been holed up in hospital for two weeks, undergoing some minor surgery. But even this much, enough to offer the smallest break from her cracked heart, the opportunity to alert Ricky's girlfriend to the true kind of bastard she was dating, drifted past Alicia, unknown to her. Instead, it took two weeks away from Allenglade High, and Ricky fucking Liar, before she started to feel any better. But as the mid-term holidays drew to a close, she found herself dreading the thoughts of going back, of peeling away the scabs that had formed over her wounds, and allowing the dark despair to seep back in.

Away on the playing fields, some grunt was calling plays, or carrying out some such sporting term. She shifted her feet miserably, feeling the warmth of the sun-baked steps through the thin material wrapping her thighs. She had, weeks earlier, painted this very place as the background to her fantasy image, with Ricky Bower lying back against the cool perimeter fence, the sun glinting in his shades. Losing her thoughts in his hazy hidden eyes as the electric touch of his soft fingertips on the warm flesh of her inner thigh sent shocks through her body. A fantasy she struggled nightly to rub from her conscience. With disgust, she asked herself why she had instinctively slipped back to this place. The tears had formed a semi-hard crust around her eyes, and it hurt to wince against the Orange County sunshine.

After History, she had stepped cautiously back into the bustling hall, needing to get to her locker to change textbooks, but frowningly aware of the possibility of running into whoever it was she was trying to forget. She inched carefully down the corridor, her eyes arrowed towards the crowds ahead, the older kids. She made it to her locker safely, unable to pick anybody in particular from the blur of colourful gabbling motion. While she was mindlessly stacking and rearranging books, the crowd began to thin, leaving only the most reluctant stragglers, and those who were contemplating making a run for the back doors, judging that such a beautiful day deserved more respect than seeing bunches of people cooped up indoors learning Algebra. As she closed the flimsy metal door, she turned her head slightly, to check the human mist for someone she didn't want to see. The clutter of black gathered around the cheap water dispenser couldn't fail to grab her eye. She gasped. It was a fucking *convention* of all the people in school that she looked up to. Every freak, every goth-like black-clad master and mistress, the only discernable absentee from the group being herself. But this was no happy gathering of dark souls, sharing their common ties and bonds. She couldn't see Ricky, but Elmyra was there, crying openly into her hands. Two tall thin stubble-haired boys in leather trenchcoats were locked together in a tight hug. Another two wandered aimlessly in small circles. Over the background sniggers and whispers of the disappearing students, Alicia heard sniffing, sobs, and the word "why?" repeated over and over again. Forgetting her prior desire to steer clear of any reminders, she edged slowly down the hall, understandably drawn towards the obvious pain of her own kind. They had never seen her as one of them, but they wore the same clothes, they all listened to the same music, they were kindred spirits. Alicia gripped the sudden fearful feeling that whatever was upsetting them was going to upset her too. As she neared the small group, she noticed Ricky sitting on the ground underneath the water dispenser, his knees pulled to his chest, his body hidden by the expanses of his girlfriend's dress. He too was crying, gobs of mascara lining his eyelids, refusing to trickle with the tears down his cheeks. Whatever it was that he had done to Alicia was lost in the overwhelming pity that welled in her heart. She could feel the tears coming, giving in to the emotion before she could even find out, wailing at nobody in particular.

"What's wrong?"

Ricky's girlfriend turned to her with huge red eyes, flashes of surprise and shock swimming in the whites. He didn't look up. She matched Alicia's wail.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Hear what?"

Panic began to gargle in her throat.

"Guinch and Frail are dead. They were found last night."

As quickly as she had embraced the unified grieving of her fellow sufferers, Alicia gave herself up to the all-conquering desire to run, to speed away in tears, efficiently and decidedly away from Ricky, Elmyra and the rest of them. The news had taken her completely – she was no longer governed by a desire to stay away from her spurning lover, or an urge to join whole-heartedly with him and his companions in their public outpouring of grief. Instead, all that she could reference at that point were the same words, looping over and over again. "*Guinch and Frail are dead.*" As she ran through the shiny-floored corridors, her sneakers chirping happily somewhere beneath her, one horrible realisation after another began dawn-like descents. She pushed through the heavy glass back entrance doors, raced down the short series of grimy steps, and made her way quickly across the green towards the seclusion of the tree-lined basketball courts.

It was over. It had to be over. With half of the band dead – or two fifths, if she didn't discount the touring live drummer, how could they carry on? Though it was something she was digging her claws in against, refusing to accept that it was true, her sinking heart was intoning that it was all over. There would be no more. No more life-changing albums. No more inspiration. Most awful of all, no more opportunities to see them perform. Each conclusion triggered a further wave of emotion, bringing fresh tears to the brims of her eyelids before shoving them overboard, down the well-established tracks on her stinging cheeks.

School was not an option for the remainder of the day. She could have gone home, but her mother would never understand, and the last thing she needed was any additional torment. Instead, she climbed the wall at the end of the football field, dropping softly onto the grass below, and headed for the river. There she spent her afternoon, drained of any ability to cry, unable to do much more than sit staring vacantly into the deep blue water. At times, she found herself wandering to such an extent that she had to remind herself why she was sitting where was, and why her eyes burned so much.

That evening, she managed to get home and into the safe haven of her bedroom before her mother could spot her condition, and demand an explanation. She cried off dinner with some lousy excuse about not being hungry. Not for the first time, she was deeply grateful for the small, flickering portable television in her room. There was no mention whatsoever of the disaster on the evening news on

any channel. It was, however, the lead story on MTV News. The zoomed picture of the two dead heroes to the left of the grave-faced goateed VJ was enough to summon forth the tears once more.

*“Good evening. The rock world is today reeling in shock at the news that two members of the multi-million-selling band Sin Sister were found dead in a Los Angeles apartment. Guitarist Guinch, real name Edward Tairns, and keyboardist Frail, real name Kelly Jaworski, were found stabbed to death in a rented apartment off Hollywood Boulevard in the early hours of this morning. Foul play has not been ruled out.”*

**chapter two**

There was absolutely no future in letting her know that she had run him out of town, and of this much he was certain. She already held enough putty power in her hands, enough leverage, and he shuddered to imagine what she'd be like if he handed over this next weapon to add to her arsenal. It was too much to expect him to turn the other cheek as she paraded through the streets, that dopey-looking idiot by her side, her figure showing the early signs of her pregnancy. What exactly was she hoping for? Hearty congratulations and a wry forgiving smile? Screw that, and fuck her. A mere four weeks after the tear-soaked speech about commitment, small-town ideas and being tied down at such an early age; that's all it took for her to hook up with that loping spaff-wand. Or at least that's how soon after the break-up that Alan had seen her with him. He was pretty sure that something had been going on before that, something that he hadn't been able to pinpoint at the time. Something which had caused the very vision of his dreams to mutate from his ideal partner to the vapid translucent cow who now swung from the arm of some other guy.

He hadn't seen her in three months, and assumed that she had to have been approaching full whale size. Providing that she hadn't miscarried, of course. It was a thought that had made itself known at some of his darkest hours, but he righteously concluded that to wish such an event on her would be nothing short of pure evil. And being a lapsed Catholic but a God-fearing man, utterly unacceptable. Still, it gave him a tiny sadistic satisfaction to laughingly propose that she was too stupid to be able to successfully carry a child within her bitter womb for nine months. That was ok, he wasn't wishing anything bad upon her, merely pointing out one of the many faults that she held to her name. Faults that had been miraculously hidden from him when they embarked on their short romance the autumn before. And once past the initial stages of rage, bitterness, numbness and apathy, Alan Kenny now found himself in the strangest, warmest place.

Having avoided her for close on three months, he had been gloriously freed from the tides of rage and pain that routinely rejected her existence inside his body. He paid close attention to this development, grateful for the manner in which his mind and body were growing. It became extremely apparent that if he managed to curb any contact with her at all, he would be free to move on in the fashion being recommended by his friends. And when the security job at Dunfarring came up, it presented itself as the perfect opportunity to leave behind

his small town and its small inhabitants. True – he was moving to a smaller place, but one in which he would know nobody. One in which he would not have to strive to avoid his heavily pregnant ex-girlfriend, and her magical ability to sink him mentally to rock bottom with the merest turn of her head. He made the move as quickly as possible, with a minimum of fuss, wanting his sudden disappearance to be as surprising to her as it was refreshing to him.

Now, three weeks into his six-month contract at the nature reserve, he was really beginning to enjoy himself. When the sudden relapse of sorrow that came with his upheaval had passed, he allowed his mind to wander back, to sift past the bad thoughts, the pain and the rage, to the good times that lay behind. When they had first met, and started dating. He did all this without a hint of sadness – what feelings he had held for her had long since passed, and there would be no going back. There couldn't be, now that she had been so soiled by another. Instead, he bounced along the happy memories just as a child would merrily recall the summer holidays of the season just gone by, without stopping to remember that the holidays had finished, and that nine months of gruesome school lay waiting. He even went as far as to start documenting some of his thoughts, realising that with these golden sunny moments, and the two years he had spent in Spain and the States, and the year on tour with his singer songwriter friend Tracey, he had some pretty intense emotional shit swimming around inside. The job offered him a great deal of time to himself, and whereas the others on duty might read, or listen to a radio, Alan found himself tapping away on the old Apple in the den corner, taking care to save all of his work to floppy disks, understanding the magnitude of the abuse that would follow should any of the others decipher what he was writing about. He would rewrite each passage fifteen or twenty times, never happy until his initial words had been transformed from pigeon fucking sappy English into the kind of flowing prose that he had been forced in school all those years ago.

He struggled for a full week with one passage in particular. It centred around a Saturday afternoon in late October, when he had been on his way to meet his woman at her workplace. The day was beginning to lose light, but the sharp tingle in the air let all those watching know that there was life left in her yet. His chore necessitated a long walk through country lanes, out towards the agricultural research facility where she temped. He didn't mind, being well wrapped against the cold, his face the only skin at the whipping wind's mercy. Away across the darkening fields lay the giant buildings of the sugar factory, sweating easily in the cold, its great plumes of steam and smoke rising

unmolested into the grey sky, before being forced to bank off at perfect forty-five degree angles by the firm hand of the breeze. The huge clanking sounds lost their menace in the transition across the fields to where Alan was standing. All he was hearing was a constant dumb roar, punctuated randomly with squealing brakes, and heavy dropping noises. The sweet sting of pulp hung dryly in the air, clinging to his nostrils like sugary snots. Each time he inhaled, savouring the spicy manure-lite flavours, his lungs burned with the accompanying freezing air.

When he was finally happy with the piece, he noticed with no little surprise that he had ended the narration some sentences short of actually meeting up with the waiting lady. This peculiarity gnawed away at him for hours, leading him to the surmised conclusion that perhaps it was the setting that made the memory, and not necessarily the person. He read and re-read the passage, delighted to find himself melting internally with his perfectly beautiful prose, the ambience and the nature of the scene captured magically. It didn't matter who he had shared the afternoon with, or even why he had been walking where he was. It was the crisp autumn setting that had captured his heart, and now he had an awesomely accurate account of the sights and smells to compliment the striking visuals. Now, if only he could paint, or even sketch – then he would have a fine set. Time after time, he had pushed himself to take the old Kodak from the kitchen press, to get on his bike, and to return to the scene of his heart-achingly special place. But it would have changed. The weather could never be the same, even the fields of beet could have fallen foul of some daft crop rotation policy. Or – even worse – sold off to make way for another housing development. No, there could be no picture. None but the one inside his head. And the manner in which he had managed to describe it was as good as any photograph.

He began reaching further and further into the depths of his memory banks, pulling at random the vivid pictures and moving animations that served to remind him of what he had achieved in the past. There was the glorious landscape painting of Rosslare Harbour as he approached it from the mainland, fiddling with his mother's car stereo as the squabbling family paused for breath to take in the awesome sight of the huge spread sprawling away beneath them. Hundreds of miles of ochre blue sea wrapping around the peninsular harbour. Dozens of cars and trucks lined up in orderly queues. Ferries at both docks, waiting to be loaded, crouched faithfully and patiently like giant white dogs. It was this image that he advertently linked to the brief but eye-opening liaison he had enjoyed with a slightly older holidaying English girl at the beginning of his teens. Perhaps if he turned his prosaic hand to flourishing a narration of the harbour

scene, he could render this particular memory as magnificently as the last one. Why stop there? What of the windswept beach in Connemara, when Tracey had learned of her father's illness, when they had shared a tearful night as touching as any he could remember? What of any one of a dozen visions he could clutch at from his time in Spain? That ridiculous weekend in Aspen? He came to the realisation that for all the misery, for all the heartbreak and the bitterness, he had thus far lived an exciting and fascinating thirty years of life. He had proven in one short afternoon his ability to transfer the bubbling thoughts and images into immensely readable prose – and that was just one example. What if he was to go systematically through each and every one of the vivid life snapshots, documenting them in the same fluid celebratory manner? At the very least, he would have a glorious collection of memories at the project's end, better than any diary, because they would capture the feelings, the smells, and every little detail. He was ridiculously confident in being able to do so. Hell – maybe there was a career in it for him. There were no names mentioned in his first passage – titled only with the date on which it had occurred, and nothing linking him blatantly to the scene. He could continue in this fashion, keeping himself anonymous, changing facenames and placenames as necessary. The images wouldn't change though. He would bundle them all together at the end, send them to literary agents or publishers or whatever, see if anybody would be interested in putting his work on the shelves. Damn, how could they not be interested? He put down the notepad on which he had been scribbling excitedly, and turned back to the Apple, reading once more over the first piece of his birthed work. Shit, it was good. Too good. Easily worthy of being published, of being unleashed upon an unsuspecting public. Whose hearts would melt as quickly as his did, each time he allowed his mind to wander back to these magical places.

A call came through minutes later, requesting him to take one of the jeeps out towards the waterfall, to where some dumb punk kids were attempting to set up tents for the night. How fucking hard was it to read any one of the minions of signs that expressly forbade such behaviour in the park? Disgusted at being pulled away from his blossoming work, he saved the changes to his file, removed the floppy disk, and shut down the word processing application. He pulled on his green Snickers jacket, checked his trouser pockets for keys, and tramped out the door. Vowing to make the little fucks pay for dragging him away.

### chapter three

If it had been something that he or the band's publicists had planned, another of the elaborate stunts that had assisted him in his meteoric rise, it would have been perfect. Controversial, sick, twisted, guzzling up column inches and airtime on the music networks. If only it was a hoax, if the two stupid bastards were secretly holed up in some hotel room, waiting for the storm to die. When he could go about the arduous task of replacing them, grateful for the way in which they had agreed to dramatise their amiable departure from the band, leaving some grade A publicity as a farewell present. But it was real. *Really* real. They weren't off somewhere, quietly celebrating their sudden freedom, their impending joy at spending the hundreds of thousands of dollars they had accumulated after two years of touring. Instead, they were *really* lying on matching slabs in some fucking LA mortuary, *really* as dead as shit.

He knew that they had been together for some time, fucking like minxes or whatever vermin it was that fucked a lot. Hell, he'd even joined in one night in the back lounge of the tour bus somewhere in Wisconsin. There had been moments of awkwardness at soundcheck the next day, but it wasn't anything that a little powder hadn't been able to smooth out. Still, Malik had the good sense to stay the fuck away whenever the two disappeared off on their own together. He didn't give a shit either way – there was a plentiful supply of young worshipping flesh in every town they visited, so he never went without. And some of the shit that Guinch was providing on disk, his contribution to the album they were scheduled to record after the tour, was truly rocking. If this was the effect that his little keyboard whore was having on his output, he heartily endorsed their relationship. Even her playing was improving – he could see it in her performances each night, and hear it in the subtle noises that complemented Guinch's layers of guitars on the demo disk.

As hard as he tried, he could not figure where or how anything had changed. Anything capable of warping their minds to even considering this bullshit suicide pact that he was left trying to understand. No mention of him or of the band in the short note that they had left, a copy of which management had furnished him with some hours earlier. Just some shit about having “expended all that we could aspire to as earthly lovers”, wanting instead to “drift eternally as two twined souls.” His disgust would not allow him to fathom such crap. He felt nothing for them as people. She had only joined at the start of the tour, and spent most of her time well away from Malik. Guinch had been on board since the

second album, but again displayed a notable distance on the tour that had just finished. They could be easily replaced, in time. That didn't stop him from hating them. But more so than the fact that they had laughingly ended each other's lives in such ridiculous fashion, or the nuisance of having to reschedule the recording of the new album, and to find new musicians, he hated them for bringing on the attention, the focus, the hordes of bastard reporters and TV people swarming outside his hotel. His own home had been sieged within hours, so he begged his manager to find him somewhere to lie low until the interest had passed. But it was hopeless. Even in extreme disguise, somebody was always going to recognise him. The fucking cops had been very quick to announce their arrival at the hotel to interview him, thus prompting the media to recamp outside the Gardbald Towers. Some even crying some crap about a murder plot, even though the suicide note said otherwise. There wasn't even anybody willing to smuggle any coke past security for him. He was losing his mind in the darkened room, sick of the constant knocking on his latched door. Of the wails that drifted upwards from the stupid fans, keeping some pointless vigil side-by-side with the ever-present reporters. He had given up answering the door, allowing only his manager Ben access, insisting that he slip a hand-written note of Malik's under the door each time before knocking once.

And it was to Ben that Malik eventually turned after five days of constant harassment from the press, the cops, and the handful of industrious fans who found ways past security and to his bedroom door. He could not handle the withering glare of the spotlight. He had no comments to make, no statements prepared. He didn't want to talk to anybody, he just wanted to be left alone. Fat fucking chance of that where he was. He couldn't offer Ben anything else to work with. No, he didn't know if he would be continuing, or if he would be needing to audition new musicians, or when he intended being ready to go back into the studio. Any other artist may well have gagged at the tactless intrusions, and the cold calculated way in which the management team were gearing only towards determining the immediate future of the band, but Malik preached total and unemotional focus from everybody in his entourage, management included. No sympathetic bullshit tendencies, or any marks of respect that were at odds with the blinkless tight lined vision they were supposed to share. The only issue at hand was the band, and how this latest incident was going to affect productivity.

At first, the suggestion that he might have to leave the country in order to avoid the attention surprised him. Surely this shit wasn't nationwide? Could he not find some temporary pad in the South to lie low in for a month or two? But

Ben insisted that people would still find him. Cut the trail completely by travelling overseas, he offered. Without hesitation, Malik decided upon Ireland. His native land, one he'd left as a bitter fifteen year old. He had not been back in the fourteen years that had passed. No need to – he'd lost contact with all the remaining members of his family, and he counted no friends worth counting in the begrudging shithole. He instructed Ben to get on his phone, to see about renting him somewhere for a couple of months. Somewhere by the sea, preferably. In the middle of nowhere. There were agencies for that kind of thing – one of his neighbours years ago had worked for one, he remembered. He asked Ben if it would be ok to crash at his place until it was all sorted. His manager didn't look too happy with the intrusion, but agreed. Grateful for the effort that Ben was going to make on his behalf, Malik muttered something about taking his Pro-Tools rig wherever he went, vowing to be working on the album while he was away. It would give Ben something to offer the label, keeping them off his back for a little longer.

Three days later, it had all been arranged. A three-month rental of Arlton Hall, expensive as shit, but Malik had assured that money was to be no problem. The place sounded good, small estate, cliff-top residence, good security. A rush job, seeing as neither Ben nor Malik himself had viewed the property, but for that fucking price, it had to be decent. And so with nothing more than the clothes on his back, a substantial withdrawal from the bank, and instructions left behind for his recording rig to be sent on by courier, Malik made his service-entrance inconspicuous station-wagoned chauffeur-driven way to a small airfield fifty kilometres outside town, to where a privately chartered five-seater jet was waiting to carry him across the Atlantic.

## chapter four

More so than any other morning in his recent adult past, Stephen Curran was vehemently opposed to leaving his mist-swept Monday morning sea-view bungalow for another stressful day at the Crawford Construction Materials head office. His pre-breakfast ritual stroll to the bottom of the infant garden had been complimented by a yawning five year old, too tired to do any more than wrap her mother's khaki canvas jacket tightly around her tiny shoulders. Maedbh seemed as reluctant as her father to let go of the magical weekend that had just passed, taking the opportunity to spend a last few minutes swinging from his arm before the two of them returned to their respective menial weeks. When she had shaken herself free of the sleep that rightfully clawed away at her senses, she probed her father once more about the rutting behaviour of the deer they had stood watching at Mount Fervis the day before. The peaceful hours whiled away in the national park had been a glorious warm down after the hectic pace of the visits to the zoo and, while it had rained, the indoor amusement arcade. And he could think of no better way to wind their weekend down to its natural conclusion than to be standing within shouting distance of the grey Spring-like beach, the petulantly freezing sea throwing itself repetitively onto the sand in bright foamy waves. With the warm powder-smelling hand of his daughter wrapped around his index finger. If only he didn't have an hour-long, broken-stereo drive back across the country to face into.

At eight, he said his goodbyes – to the still-yawning child struggling into her uniform, and to his flu-stricken wife, who insisted testily that she was well capable of walking their daughter to school. He left her with strict instructions to call Mary or Cathy if she didn't feel up to it, and made his way to the car. With no stereo or no radio to keep him company, he felt his eyes drooping heavily on more than one occasion, and vowed bitterly to get someone to come out to take a look at his system in the afternoon. The Crawford offices were situated on the south perimeter belt of the city, and as such granted him daily pardon from the ill-tempered traffic jams that clogged the inner network of roads and bypasses. He pulled into the car park in good time, noting the first timid drops of rain on his windscreen, and already longing for the very next time he would sit into his '94 Opel Astra.

It would be a slow day, in between the monthly accounts, a fact not lost on the other three guys who shared his office, who still hadn't shown up by half-nine. As the three grey-suited men bundled through the door at 9.35, carrying

waves of good-natured banter and expensive aftershave, Stephen felt a red hot indignance. Angry at the fact that he had been behind his desk at nine, ready and prepared, while the remaining members of his team breeze in forty minutes late, unrepentant, not even offering explanations or excuses. That they had arrived in humorous tandem did nothing to alleviate his mood. If he had been their superior, in a position to rebuke their tardiness, it might have cheered him a little. But instead, he was one of them, no more powerful, no more able to question their timekeeping than he was able to regulate it. Instead, he bit his lip between his teeth, waiting for them to crowd around into his cubicle, eager to swap weekend details, and to suggest that perhaps it was time they went for breakfast. Still, as he recalled the images and the sounds of his weekend just passed, and tried to synopsis them into short, sharp and suitable soundbites for his younger would-be listeners, he began to feel a little happier in himself. Maybe they weren't so bad after all.

They were surprisingly attentive, folding their arms in the correctly interested manner, and putting aside all other tasks to make room in their non-bustling Monday morning schedule to ask Stephen how his weekend had been. He'd let slip on Friday his father-daughter plans, and as such was addressed in a most inviting way.

"So how was your weekend, Grandad?"

"Father-Daughter Weekend, was it not?"

Their smirks were not malicious, or intended to chafe, so he smiled back, and launched into his well-prepared account. The others individually acknowledged that the older man was experiencing "a different buzz" to them, one that they too perhaps might encounter. Some day. For now, it was easy enough to feed off the pride that shone in his eyes, to make approving murmuring noises at the appropriate times, and to ask questions that need not be asked, but afforded the happy parent the opportunity to wax lyrical some more.

About an hour before lunch, the three of them bundled back across into the cramped confines of Stephen's cubicle. He minimised the PGA records website that he had been browsing through, and looked up quizzically. Two full-compliment social visits in the one day?

"What's up?"

"Nothing. We just want to see if you're free on the twenty-second of June."

Off the top of his head, yes. But with regard to something that they were planning, probably not.

"I'd have to check. Why?"

Kevin had obviously appointed himself spokesperson for this particular venture. And he had good reason – it was originally his idea.

"We're putting together a paintballing weekend, just the four of us. A bean counting team session."

Holy shit, it was worse than he could have even dreamed of.

"Paintballing?"

How immature was that?

"With a difference."

Derek piped up, unable to contain his excitement. There was a brief flash of focused concern on Kevin's face, which faded once he had regained control of the floor.

"Yeah. We're not going to one of those stupid complexes, or to a nice, safely cordoned-off park. We're going out into the wild. No instructors, no flags to win, no boundaries. Just us, a couple of maps, and the great wide open."

Like *The Deer Hunter* with paint, Stephen groaned internally.

"Sounds alright", he lied. He wasn't fooling anybody. It was Derek's turn to look worried.

"You're not on for it, are you?"

"Well, not really."

Given the time, he could probably think of a hundred things he'd rather do than traipse around some woods with a paintball gun, hunting down three over-excited twenty-something children in combat gear. Number one, another weekend like the one he'd just had with Maedbh. Number two, take his wife and his daughter across the bay to one of the larger towns where...

"Oh come on, it'll be awesome. We'll get a couple of tents, pitch them somewhere, bring a bunch of beer and food. Hold on, I've got a map on my desk."

Aidan, who up until now had been silent, pushed his way around the other side of the partition where he fumbled noisily with what sounded like a map.

"Tents?"

"Sure. It's practically summer, the perfect weather for camping."

It had been ten years and ten Glastonbury festivals since Stephen had last spent the night in a tent. He'd gotten used to comfort. Aidan made his way back around, crunching his all-important map as he squeezed in past the other two. Stephen noticed a large stretch of light blue at the bottom – they were heading for the coast, then.

“Look. There’s a nature reserve of some kind here, but I doubt if they’re gonna look too kindly on us tearing around scaring the shit out of the animals. So we’ll stick to the moors *here*.”

His finger was tracing lines through a vast wilderness just to the left of the dark nature reserve. The area looked bleak even on a map.

“There’s a village just here, Dunfarring, so we can park cars there if you’re not too keen on leaving them out in the open.”

Stephen wasn’t too keen on the idea as a whole, but his conscience would not allow him to shoot down his eager prospectors in flames. He’d find a gentler way to let them down. Find a flaw in their preparation, or something.

“What about equipment?”

“Sorry?”

“For the paintballing?”

“Oh, that’s sorted. I’ve got a mate who works at the arena in Gorstown. He says he can hire us out some spare equipment pretty cheaply. Guns, paint, uniforms. He’s the one who said that the arena was a bit confined, that we’d be better off taking the shit and heading into the mountains or something.”

So he’s the one to blame, thought Stephen.

“Come on, Steve. We never do anything outside of work. There’s only a few of us in this whole place who’re not part of the social club. Let’s show them we don’t need their shitty club.”

Ah, defiance in the face of the company – always guaranteed to heat the blood of the select few in there. Stephen detected a trace of rational truth in Kevin’s point. He was sick of dealing with cheery souls in the various different departments, boasting and gossiping about who had said what, and who had nearly slept with whom on the most recent company murder fucking mystery weekend. He hadn’t joined the social club at the beginning of his career with Crawford’s because Joan had been pregnant, and as such he hadn’t seen many opportunities for socialising cropping up. Almost six years later, he still had not felt the need to request an application form.

“I don’t know. I’ll get back to you. When do you need to know?”

Derek shrugged, seemingly understanding that perhaps their senior partner was going to be a lost cause.

“Ten minutes before we leave will do. If you change your mind, that is.”

Stephen had to laugh at the forlorn expressions.

“I haven’t said no yet. I just have to check at home. My wife might have something going on. I’ll let you know as soon as I do.”

Despite finding that a miniscule portion of the organisers' enthusiasm had rubbed off on him, he still had no intention whatsoever of joining the three stooges on their nature hike when his decidedly more perky wife called straight after lunch. If there wasn't anything going on, he'd invent something for his own benefit. But there would be something going on.

"Do you remember me telling you that we'd been invited to Donnacha's communion?"

"Uh-huh."

"On the twenty-second? Next month?"

So he *hadn't* been lying. There was something on. Perfect.

"Sure."

"Well there's been a slight change of plans. Some screw-up with the bishop being double-booked or something. Donnacha's ceremony is now on the Friday afternoon."

"What?"

"I know. I've never heard the like of it before."

"That's ridiculous. What are you doing about it?"

He half-expected, for some reason, to hear her quietly accept that she wouldn't be able to make it across the country for her sister's son's big day out.

"I think I'll take the little girl out of school for the day. She won't miss much, it's coming towards the end of the year. I'll probably drive myself in the morning, if that's ok. Unless you can take the day off?"

No, he couldn't take the day off. In preparation for the end-of-monthly accounts, all hands were required on deck. Not clenched around a steering wheel on a sticky hot two hundred mile road trip across the country.

"No, I can't do that. You know that."

"Well maybe you can take a bus over?"

"Why, how long are you planning on staying?"

It was getting worse by the second.

"Well, if we're going that far, we might as well make a weekend of it. You could come over after work, or maybe in the morning?"

He was not taking any stinking fucking bus, and that much was already decided – without negotiation.

"You know me and buses, honey."

"Yeah."

How the hell was he going to get to work in the morning?

"How am I going to get to work if you've got the car?"

She had apparently already thought of this.

"I can probably drop you off. It's only about half an hour out of my way."

Well then how the hell would he get home?

“How about getting home?”

“I don’t know – bus?”

He managed to filter the sigh, saving his wife from the full brunt of his growing discomfort.

“So you’re not going to be able to make it?”

Her voice sounded genuinely disappointed, not harping. She would miss his presence, rather than give him shit for not being there. That made him feel good. Good enough to start apologising for his own reluctance to make arrangements to travel two hundred miles to hook up with his waiting family.

“I’m sorry. I can’t take the Friday off. And even if I took a bus after work, I wouldn’t get there until maybe midnight. And you know how much I hate buses.”

“I know.”

“And with me already missing the ceremony in the afternoon...”

More soothing noises, and confirmation that she understood.

“If I could drive, I’d be over in a shot.”

“I know.”

She probably didn’t suggest that she and Maedbh would take the bus instead because she knew that there was no way Stephen would have them subjected to the torture of that long uncomfortable public transport journey.

“I’ll miss you. And Maedbh will too.”

The killer playing card.

“I’ll miss you both.”

Half an hour later, having dramatically shunned the idea of a weekend spent lying around at home, thinking of his wife and child enjoying themselves on the other side of the country, Stephen was standing at Kevin’s desk. Perhaps it was a lousy thing to do, to be provisionally mumbling about having run out of excuses to skip the weekend of immature childish activities that his workmates were planning, having only just turned down a trip to his sister-in-law’s. But in his immediate unfocused haze of disappointment, he projected himself having a marginally less miserable time moping with three energetic twenty-somethings on an outdoor pursuits jaunt than on his own at home. He’d hold off on telling Joan his plans for that particular weekend until much nearer the date. Having known him for as long as she did, there was no way she could accuse him of blowing off the Communion trip, choosing instead to go paintballing in the wilderness. If anything, it sounded like an incredibly uninged move, one designed to take his mind away from the fact that he would otherwise be alone in his empty sea-view house. She would probably show extreme concern. *You’re doing what?*

And no sooner had he relented to the organisers putting his name down for one of everything, he wanted his name taken back off the list.

**chapter five**

It was as warm a day as any that Oleg could remember in the fourteen years he and his family had spent in the small Irish coastal village. The second day of what would be a week of unusually extreme heat for the month of May. The sun beat down relentlessly, laughing at the meagre attempts of the nearby sea to cool the natives with its generously-intended salty breezes. Instead, the gentle swirling winds carried with them the burning heat of the afternoon, each humid gust causing those unfortunate enough to lie in their path to adjust their breathing accordingly. He stripped the soaking hat from his head, pausing to sweep his hand slowly across his brow, feeling hot streams of sweat beginning to trickle over his fingers. Quickly raising his dribbling finger to acknowledge the hailing man on the other side of the main paddock. Mick was obviously having some problem with the horse he was attending to – Juniper or Gorhatt's Ride, one or the other, Oleg couldn't tell through the shimmer. He placed the soft cloth hat back on his head and ambled slowly out into the dry field. He could have turned back towards the east shed, and taken one of the golf carts, but he preferred walking. Especially on such a glorious day as this.

Later that afternoon, having covered the three miles between the stud and the village in mere minutes, bouncing around in Mick's beaten-up old Ford pick-up, Oleg decided to stick his head into Duggan's before walking home. To see if any of the boys were in, or at the very least, if there was a familiar face willing to join him in a sweaty celebration of the weather. Hell, who was he trying to fool? He'd have a damn pint even if it meant pulling it himself, and sitting on the roof of the pub to drink it. As it was, as he poked his perspiring face into the cool wooden tones of the hotel bar, someone – either Padraig or Donal – his ears were a little woollen after the heat – called out his name. In the strange Irish sing-song twist that practically everybody around here adopted. His dear mother would turn in her grave back in the Ukraine if she could hear the strange ways in which they called his name. But surely Mama it is better to have them calling my name incorrectly than to have them not call my name at all? He whispered this happily in his native tongue, careful to not let his lips be seen moving. People who spoke to themselves in these parts were laughed at. Oleg did not like being laughed at. It was hard enough when sometimes people could not understand his accent. He was fiercely jealous of his daughter's near-perfect grasp of the English language. Such a silly language.

Two pints later, and with earfuls of the latest gossip and hearsay, Oleg made his way back out into the heated evening. Grateful for the soothing breeze that now found its way unperturbed from the chattering sea onto the burning skin of his face and arms. The thick fronds of tall grass that dotted the sand dunes at the back of the small beach car park swayed quietly in broken rhythms. The dunes served as a natural sea wall, separating the golden beach effectively from the village, necessitating an ungainly scramble over the soft sands in order to reach the strand itself. At least for those unmoved by malicious whips of grass scraping at their bare legs, or those who were too impatient to walk to the far end of the car park, where there was a tank-sized gap sloping downwards onto the beach. There was a plastic bag trapped in the fence at the roadside end of the sparsely occupied clearing, its bright white colour a stark contrast to the dusty summer haze of its surroundings. It was a good fifteen minute walk from the village centre out to the end of Dargan's Lane, the first few hundred yards along the hidden sea front, and his legs pumped with renewed vigour as the Guinness slowly soaked into his muscles. He had long since been turned onto the ways of the locals' chosen drink. Although if he had been loathe to adopt the heavy stout as his new favourite, there was very little choice otherwise. Brendan Duggan offered nothing more than one stout, three beers and one ale on tap. Guinness, Harp, Smithwicks and a couple of others. A variety of whiskeys, bottled beers and ciders and fancy short drinks behind the bar. Bizarrely, some of those infernal alcoholic lemonades for the younger ones. He was already dreading the day when his own daughter would ask him if she could taste one of them. Bad news, he reckoned. She would not be so quick to ask for a taste of a normal drink.

At home, Ama was watching television in the front room, her bare feet curled underneath her skinny legs, which, like the rest of her skin, were two or three shades darker than the darkest child in Dunfarring. She was getting older by the day. Any minute now, she would be looking to go out on dates. With boys. The beginning of a new set of nightmares, Oleg groaned silently as she preened a greeting without turning back from *Neighbours*. Still, the fact that she had lived happily and healthily to an age where he could worry about potential boyfriends was in itself something to thank God for. The children of so many of his friends back home would not have been so lucky. Even those who had lived were scarred permanently. Not a day passed when Oleg did not stop to consider in his prayers just how lucky he had been. *You are too silly*, his friends had chided, as he outlined his fears and his concerns after the first round of small accidents. *Nothing will go wrong. The plant is safe.* Even now, with a concrete shell encasing the shattered remains at Chernobyl, the plant is not safe, he countered. On that dark, early April morning, his car had been among the very first leaving Pripyat,

reacting immediately to his brother Levyan's precautionary fifteen-second phonecall. The year after the explosion, he had moved to Ireland from his sister's home in Switzerland, leaving behind fears of radiation, iodine and all of that crazy business.

He had been lucky in getting out in time, lucky in having a lovely sister who was willing to put her own family at risk to provide shelter for his, and lucky in having a brother-in-law who financed their eventual relocation to Ireland. Everybody had been surprised when he decided upon Ireland as their new home, but to Oleg, it made perfect sense. It was the furthest-most country in Europe, as far away from Russia and her radiation clouds as possible without crossing the Atlantic Ocean. In Ireland too, he had been lucky. Lucky to find the advertisement in one of the national newspapers on the very night they had arrived in Dublin. Or rather, his wife had found it. She was the one with the excellent English, the one capable of scouring the job sections for him. He needed to find a job or welfare or something within a month, he had estimated, before his money ran out. The hostel was cheap, but still ate away daily at his finances. The informal interview was set for a date two weeks before the end of Oleg's financial month. He spent the intermittent time studying intently with his wife, trying to translate his skills from the years working at the Yeshkin Stud into decipherable English, just enough to give him a shot at securing this vital job. And it had worked. Perfectly. The three of them had travelled by bus to Wexford, and taken a taxi to Dunfarring, Oleg testing his new vocal skills on the taxi driver, who seemed none the worse for understanding him. The interview was magical, all laughs and extended interest in him and his family. Stone-faced concern at the very mention of Chernobyl. Oleg struggled momentarily in his efforts to convince the nice man and woman that the three of them had not been infected, and had been thoroughly monitored in clinics in Switzerland. The concern then moved to the difficulty with which they assumed he had pulled his family across the breadth of the continent. Oleg agreed, and stressed that the job was therefore very important to him. His references – though forged on a foolscap pad and printed in a small printing shop in Dublin, were glowing. They offered him the job there and then. And provided him with the name of a local woman looking to rent out her emigrating son's cottage on Dargan's Lane. Two months later, Oleg had earned himself a reputation as a diligent, honest worker, and had moved into No.9, Dargan's Lane. His wife was making weekly trips into Wexford, negotiating with crafts shop owners who were interested in selling her hand-carved wooden fare. And little Ama was getting on famously with the three boys next door, sons of the friendly policeman and his cake-making wife.

Fourteen years later, Oleg still found the time to marvel at just how fortunate he had been.

**chapter six**

Alan swung the steering wheel of his choking petrol-driven mini-truck sharply, and coasted roughly off the main path onto one of the tiny dirt tracks that shot fearlessly away into the woods. There would be more shelter in amongst the trembling trees, more so than if he was to attempt to make it to the nearest hut. For all their overhanging attempts, the trees lining the utility road were unable to prevent the torrential downfall from reaching its apparent target, seated like a sitting duck on the uncovered driver's seat. He was already soaked to his skin, his face beginning to sting with the sheer ferocity of the larger drops. The truck bounced unconvincingly down the path, hurtling towards being out of control, until Alan swerved smoothly to the right, bringing the vehicle to a halt and shutting off the puttering engine in one movement. He and the smoking green truck sat motionless in a small canopied clearing, where the track widened sufficiently to take the length of his carriage without complaint. The only noises that remained were the hammering of the rain overhead, and the sporadic splish-splashes of the more defiant drips as they bounced through the branches onto the chilled forest floor. Together, they were enough to practically deafen him.

The rain was clean and bright, forcing the wooden aroma of the surrounding vegetation towards Alan's cold nostrils. He swallowed great gulps of the sweet sensation, feeling his mind beginning to shut itself gently as the lightest of mists found its way onto his face. He could have easily closed his eyes and fallen asleep there and then. No better way to spend the remaining hour left on his clock. Especially with this ridiculous summer downpour rendering his job pretty much pointless.

With his eyes flittering between open and closed, and his senses ravished by the smells of the forest, he caught himself drifting sleepily backwards. For some reason, through great swathes of colour and circumstance, touching on jumbled images and faces until he found one worthy of concentrating on. And locking on. Aspen. New Year's Eve, 1995. All he was seeing was the tar-stained wooden lodge, and the snow all around, but it was enough. Enough to capture and harness his new-found writing mind. Enough to point him towards the next chapter in his ongoing reconstruction of his truly memorable occasions thus far. And shit, this would be a good one.

She had been a Canadian tourist, stopping off in Boston for a couple of months as part of some year-long "finding herself" bullshit. He had been minding

his own business in The Porter House on 22<sup>nd</sup> and Hope, happily throwing back pints of the black stuff with a bunch of his builder mates, celebrating as the lousy weather had afforded them a mid-November afternoon off work. They had noticed the three girls walking in, and kept a hushed watchful eye on them as they ordered drinks and seated themselves not too far from the table of six Irishmen. After no more than sixty seconds, one of the guys, Liam, sneered at the schoolboy giggles and suggestions of his comrades.

“Fuck it boys, I’m going to ask them to join us.”

And despite the pleas of those around him, the majority of whom did not rate their chances of even holding accountable conversations with the three tanned backpackers, their confident workmate strode across to the girls’ table, and could be heard – through decidedly slurred speech – politely offering the company of himself and his five friends as an alternative to the girls’ own. Somewhat surprisingly, after a brief discussion among themselves, the three took their drinks and belongings, and moved cautiously as one towards the hopeful, waiting assembly.

Alan was already feeling the burn of six quick pints on his cheeks, and effectively omitted himself from any potential movements beyond polite manners. To his enormous surprise, and to his loose friends’ chagrin, the tallest of the new additions, a chestnut-haired girl with a spreading smile who had introduced herself as Hillary, struck up something along the lines of a friendly rapport with him. She was originally from Vermont, with definite traces of France still detectable in her accent. As the evening progressed, having compared childhoods in Canada and Ireland, travelling experiences and impressions of America, it became alarmingly apparent to Alan that she was showing some kind of interest in him. A fact that he confirmed smoothly when she willingly furnished him with her temporary number at the end of their extended night. He called her the next evening, delighted to hear her agreeing to meet him again, two days later. On their own. This time, both veered away from alcohol of any kind, suffering simultaneously from their respective weekends, but getting along just as easily as on the first drunken occasion. They continued to see each other, once or twice weekly, with Alan eventually giving in to ignore the voices that forbade him to fall for this transient woman. How could he resist? The signs were all present and counted. The tiny touches. The little things said and done. The random shows of tenderness and affection that were above and beyond those deemed appropriate for a simple, uncomplicated, meaningless fling. He had no way of telling if her behaviour was the norm in Canada for such a situation – from where he came from, she was showing way too much for him to fear the worst. Hence

he had very little trepidation or consideration for the dark side on the weekend when he finally admitted to himself just how he felt.

When she invited him along to the huge reunion that her friends had planned for New Year's Eve, Alan was both excited and terrified. During the six weeks in which they had been seeing each other, he had refrained from letting slip any of his feelings to her. In return, she had said nothing, but continued to display the signs that had been so convincing. They had slept over in each other's apartments, but never done anything of note. He was painfully aware of her impending departure from Boston – she was scheduled to head out east to New York next. In the back of his mind, he was constantly planning his big speech. About how he felt that what they had growing was too strong to abandon. About how he was willing to do whatever it took to keep up with her. If that meant moving to Canada whenever she returned, so be it. As ridiculous as these notions felt to him, he was constantly comforted by the fact that he had not felt such reciprocation from somebody *he* was into in a long time.

However, he would never get to make such a speech. The week after they had returned from Aspen, she began excusing herself from meeting him. She stopped returning his calls. Day after day of misunderstood panic followed, with pokes of stubborn anger preventing him from calling her. Eventually, he summoned the courage one hungover afternoon, and asked directly if she wanted to meet him again. She said yes. His misplaced relief was torn to shreds that evening – she was as distant and as cold as his worst enemy could have gleefully wished for. Having perhaps been prepared for the worst some days earlier, Alan was relatively unmoved as he came to his own conclusions, nursing a lukewarm Southern Comfort in a red leather booth. It wasn't anything that she said; not that she had to. He wasn't interested in hearing her excuse. The weeks that he had spent fermenting his own fears and thoughts had left him fabulously embittered. He just wanted to beat her with her own punchline.

"You don't want to see me any more, do you?"

She seemed a little taken aback, but retained enough composure to pounce, as he saw her seeing it.

"No."

"Fine".

He was frank and curt, condensing his boiling anger and pain into something useable. Any stupid show of emotion would have degraded himself

internally. He could do that another day, another time. When she wouldn't see it. She was frowning, puzzled.

"It's just that..."

"I don't want to hear it".

Reaching instantly for his jacket, savouring the look of unrehearsed surprise across her features. She hadn't scripted this, obviously. What was he supposed to do, cry into his glass? He struggled the beige denim onto his shoulders, thanked her sarcastically for the *happier* times, and bade her farewell. The days that followed were numb but empowered with marvel at the way in which he had handled himself. Which rapidly dissipated into cruel bright misery. Two weeks later, he was on a despairingly arranged flight back to Ireland. Home, away from Boston and its memories.

Having long since moved on past hatred, apathy and the rest of his range of useless emotions, Alan had consistently marked that surreal New Year's sojourn to Aspen as a perfectly indicative highlight of his short time with the Canadian girl. It no longer hurt to remember. And again, it was the situation, and not necessarily the company, that made it so special to him. A bunch of her blatantly spoiled school friends had taken over somebody's parents' holiday lodge high in the hills outside the ski resort, and fashioned an informal formal black tie gathering to see in the New Year in 1995. The town was every bit as magical as television had led him to believe – snow lined streets, colourfully-wrapped skiers slithering along the paths, Christmas decorations still hanging from windows, and smiles on the faces of all the rich people.

The party itself was a raucous affair, moving from room to room, wing to wing, and finally out into the crisp snow, where girls were playfully upended, and the boys amused themselves with snowball warfare. Back inside, with everybody pink of cheek and short of breath, wet clothes were discarded, and a huge plastic bucket of warm whiskey and vodka-soaked fruit was produced by one enterprising soul. In front of a blazing fire, with the friendly babbles of bullshitting but well-meaning Canadians and Americans in his ears, and the sock-foot of his chosen female resting lightly in his lap, Alan found it extremely hard to be anything other than completely at peace with the world.

As the rain continued to hammer on the buckling arms overhead, he pulled the engine of the petrol truck into life, intending to push it to its limits on the sodden journey back to the hut. And the waiting Apple Mac. He could not wait to paint his linguistic picture of the snowy retreat. Even now, with only the briefest of

concentrations, he was able to reference the evening as the clearest of images – fleeting carefully past any detrimentally specific pointers to a Canadian backpacker, and whatever reason she had for moving onwards and away from him.

**chapter seven**

Malik slammed the receiver viciously back down into its cradle, knowing damn well that the conviction of his anger would not translate to his manager's ear on the other side of the Atlantic. The conversation that had just ended had not gone to plan. He pulled himself from the velvet armchair in the hall, and stamped sullenly along the narrow carpeted corridor towards the kitchen. *The ungrateful fucking prick*. He had filled Ben with all the kinds of happy shit that he knew he wanted to hear, and yet still his so-called manager was unwilling to take even the tiniest steps in sorting out a few creature comforts for his loyal client. Fucking useless.

"You know as well I do that there's no way you'd get through customs".

"Fuck customs. Wrap it, put it in food, pretend it's some asshole's ashes or something".

It did not warrant the fuss that Ben was making. Malik was getting more and more frustrated with his manager's good sense by the second.

"Do you really want to risk it? Do you want to risk being caught by the police? Your name all over the news? Didn't you go over there to get away from all that shit?"

"I didn't come over here to attend the Betty fucking Ford Clinic", he growled, failing to see any kind of reason.

"I know, but trust me, it's not worth the risk. Maybe one of your guys has the name of somebody over there".

Malik snorted. About as likely as him harvesting his own among the root vegetables in the small garden around the back of Arlton Hall. Ben expected no less derision.

"Yeah, I know, a long shot".

Malik tried another approach.

"Are you coming over?"

"Me? No, why, do you want me to?"

"If you're not travelling alone..."

His suggestion carried the faintest hint of a grin. Ben wearily accepted that his ward was serious, and held him at arm's length.

"What do you think I am - stupid? I'm not carrying that shit for you".

It had been another shot of length, but opened itself to negotiation nonetheless.

"Would anybody else?"

"Who?", with a sigh and a hand held to his face.

“I don’t know – anybody?”

“If you’re thinking about some dumb shit fan, forget about it. No brains, they’d get caught. Can’t you get any of that action over there?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s all in the wrist right now, baby”.

It was something of a rueful reply, enough to deflect his attention briefly away from the matter at hand, but when it came to his narcotics, Malik was very rarely diverted for anything more than pittance time.

“Can’t you even *try* to find somebody capable of carrying some shit?”

Ben settled for offering a pretty non-committal promise, one designed to delay the tantrum of a spoiled child, but deciphered efficiently by the tinny voice on the other end of the line.

“I’ll see what I can do. Talk to your guys, see if any of them have any suggestions. But I’m not promising anything”.

“That’s fucking dope, man. Thanks”.

The sarcasm would have to suffice in getting his displeasure across – at the other end, Ben wouldn’t know any differently had he hurled the receiver back into position, or simply pressed gently on the reset button. Then again, having worked, coaxed, coerced and lied alongside the volatile vocalist for seven long years, Ben knew *exactly* what way his charge had ended the conversation.

Pulling on a generous mouthful of clear vodka from the bottle in the fridge, Malik fumed nasally at the unreasonable rigidity of his manager. He had opened the phonecall with the kinds of noises he knew Ben was dying to hear. Words about creativity, about a Pro-Tools rig arriving safely and intact. Tapes, loops, workable mixes and demos. He wasn’t lying, merely stretching the truth. Fact was, he had some wicked ideas for his all-important post-tragedy album. One tune incorporating vaguely in places a short story that some nutcase fan had posted on his website guestbook some time ago, about a loner who went on a spree of self-mutilation, an autobiographical diary entry for all Malik knew; the bloody thing had frozen their server for twenty-four hours. He had some sketches of riffs, a few pages of drunken mumblings that could easily mutate into killer lyrics. But Ben could use the exaggeration, pacify the worried suits at the label. Assure them that Sin Sister would return triumphant from the ashes of the tragic double suicide. Ready to milk the overwhelming public interest, sympathy and outcry for all its worth. So for all intents and purposes – including buttering Ben into a flexible and helpful position, Malik happily bloated his work in progress into a handful of rough tracks – pieces he wouldn’t let anybody - Ben included - hear until he was totally happy with them. And yet minutes later, with the relief and the

gratitude poking through his whine-bordered voice, his manager was still stubbornly refusing to return the favour.

Later that afternoon, with little or no worthy food left in the kitchen to sort the rumbling ache in his stomach, he gave in to reason, and left the great silent house. On the two previous occasions when he had ambled into the village, he had also been drunk, and omnipotently unmoved by the curious stares of the bumpkin locals. Now, with a little extra alcohol, and a whole lot more anger, he was sneeringly ready to confront anybody who so much as looked at him in a crooked manner. As he walked through the main gates, the heavy wrought iron twists held back in place by football-sized rocks, his knee-length boots crunched heavily on the stones beneath. Past the gate pillars, and beyond the protection of the two-foot thick walls, he was greeted with a blast of hot salty sea-wind, forcing him to catch his breath, and curse with it. His crushed velvet tank top billowed gratefully in the breeze, allowing cooler air to circulate around his torso. He was already feeling the strain on his legs as his tight leather-clad legs soaked in the first few blasts of sunshine. Wasn't this supposed to be a fucking temperate climate? No matter. Within seconds, he would have joined the soft path that ran parallel to the front wing of his temporary home. The path that curved through the cool shaded forest ahead, providing a faux-sub-tropical green sheltered tunnel link between Arlton Hall and the edge of the small inbred seaside village. His expensive cliff-top hideout was unusual in the sense that its main entrance opened only onto the dark green of Quinn's Forest, with pedestrian access and egress only. All vehicles were expected to report to the back entrance to the small estate, using the short private road which slinked its way through the trees to the main road to the north.

Along the way, with bright yellow lasers of sunlight beaming through the trees, Malik planned his impending afternoon. He *had* to get some food. Check. But yet with the cheer of half a litre of Russian fire-water in his blood, he *wanted* to get some more. Check. He didn't remember seeing anything of an entertaining nature in either of the provisions stores on the main - or rather *only*- street. Maybe the bar in the shitty little hotel would have some take-out facilities. Sit, while he was there, why not make an occasion of it? Sample what the local watering hole had to offer? Meet the locals in a relaxed, social atmosphere. Check out what talent the bumpkins had to offer. Hell, there had to be a jewel of some kind around. After what had seemed like nightly action on the mammoth two-year tour of the world he had recently stepped off, his current life was akin to that of a fucking straight-edge monk. That was settled, then. Acknowledging the

reminder in his gut, he mapped his minutes accordingly, stopping and stooping to pick up a dry twig from the forest floor to hurl viciously at the happily cheeping terns overhead.

He swept out from the dusty shelter of the tunnel, across the shallow path worn into the short skutch grass at its edge, and onto the blacktop that bent away on his left, bordering the outline of the forest he'd just left behind. The road – “Dargan’s Lane”, as the bright metal plate pinned to the short wall opposite announced, was graced on the other side by a series of small cottages, which began about halfway up. Cars flashed by occasionally in shiny glints of colour on the road which intersected at the lane’s far end. There was a sudden suggestion of claustrophobia in the warmth, despite the sprawling spaces around him, and the gurgling sea nearby. Malik climbed the small humpbacked bridge that led into the village, turning to catch the sister bridge at the far end of the green expanse. The hollow, dotted with what he assumed were children at the other end, ran in a perfectly sculpted line, perpendicular to each of the small gardens backing onto it from the cottages along Dargan’s Lane. An old discontinued rail line, he had concluded. He made his way along the deserted road, squinting in the early evening haze, trying to make out any signs of life ahead. As he got nearer, the two shapes lying against the car park fence came into focus, two possible wide-boys, no more than seventeen or eighteen, offering him a greeting he hadn’t heard before – “well?” – one he couldn’t place as being friendly or threatening. He could take either.

“Yeah”, he responded, for the first time regretting the shades which hid his equally ambivalent eyes. If they were being genuinely friendly, polite or whatever, fine. But if they wanted to step up, he’d take them. Fucking inbred punks. He moved past without altering his pace, scanning the immediate horizon, but finding nothing more than a scattering of faintly blurred people going about their daily business. One of the jerks now behind him made a comment of some kind – Malik couldn’t decipher either through decibel or accent. Regardless, his attention had been snatched by the instinctive, tell-tale set of colours that honed into view a little distance in front of him. Pristine white, copper-tan and sun-touched brown. She, and the grey-haired red-shirted guy with her, were moving away at half the speed of Malik as he closed in. Her back was to him, a tight curved figure in a clinging white T-shirt, melting into knee-length navy shorts, but he didn’t need to see her face. He *knew*. They stopped, but she moved around the outside of the man in the red shirt, pulled the arms of the plastic bag held in her hand together, and strode off. Further away from Malik. He baulked

momentarily at the tiny surge of disappointment, before catching himself and smiling tightly. Maybe this wasn't such a total hole. Maybe there was something for him here. Maybe he would enjoy his isolation after all.

A quick scour of the first shop he came to confirmed his earlier suspicions – nothing in the way of alcohol besides vinegar. He didn't bother crossing the street to try the second, deciding it would be a worthless trip. To his amazed disgust, the Beach Café – though it was nothing more than a drop-down takeaway opening in the wall with a couple of metres of stone wall seating leading up to it, didn't open for business until 6pm. His nose guided him in substitute towards the tacky-looking Strand Hotel, so called either because it was within redneck tobacco-hocking range of the beach, or because its manky peeling paint once bore a resemblance in colour to the dull golden shades of sand. Others may well have seen its character; Malik only saw its lack thereof. Through the old-style glass and wood doors at the porched entrance, he could see a large sign pointing to the bar, but made his way past to where Duggan's bar enjoyed its own separate opening onto the street.

He pulled off his glasses, pushed through a complaining swing door, and moved into the chilled dark pub. An electric fan whirred irritably in quick semi-circular loops, sitting on the edge of the bar opposite him, which jutted out from from a mirrored wall in a symmetrical extended L-shape. The middle-aged barman clinked some unseen glasses, seemingly unshaken by Malik's entrance, leaving the curious gaping to the two old guys sitting at the bar. They had their backs to the new addition, but copped crafty eyefuls by poring over his reflection in the mirror behind the counter. Malik moved away, around the second corner of the bar, from where he recognised he would have the best view of the room. He climbed onto one of the three free high stools, caught the barman's eye, and turned to take quick stock of his locale as his newly-appointed landlord finished off whatever task he was attending to. Two discretely inquisitive old men huddled over pints of Guinness to his north-west. The main door away behind them, along the same line of vision. A long church-like seat skirting the street-facing wall on his left, one large frosted window, three small tables at equal intervals with tiny wooden stools for comfort. Behind the approaching barman, a gap leading to the door he had seen advertised from the hotel. And to Malik's reachable right, another door, with carefully carved caricatures of a stickman and stickwoman, with "Toilets" displayed above them.

"What can I get you?"

The barman, the collar of his starched white sleeveless shirt scraping against shaving grazes along the base of his neck, was standing with both hands pressed on the edge of the bar in front of Malik. Neither welcoming nor hostile. Just like the rest of the town. Malik scanned the taps in front of him. It had been a while.

“Um, give me a vodka. Straight up”.

He failed to recognise the colloquialism of his order, and the efficiency with which the barman translated and carried out. He placed a clear long glass with a miserable amount of liquor in the bottom on the counter.

“That’s two-eighty”.

“Can you make it a double, please?”

As the old men mumbled something to themselves, the barman turned without discernible emotion, poured another measure, and tipped it into Malik’s glass. He fumbled in his pocket for cash, decided against bringing any more attention to himself by removing the full wad of notes, and peeled the top bill messily away and out onto the counter.

“Thanks”.

“Thank you”.

Malik raised his doubled-quantity glass, turned momentarily to the old guys, and lifted his eyebrows and arm in a kind of salutatory toast. They fell over themselves to respond in kind, taking mouthfuls of creamy black Guinness into firm whiskered caverns.

“How’re you guys doing?”

He wasn’t sure why he was attempting to strike up a conversation. It wasn’t for their approval. Hell no. Maybe he could attribute it to being a good-humoured drunk. Well, at least an on-the-way-to-becoming-drunk. Besides, he was getting a little sick of his own company. Even that of a couple of old coots seemed a better alternative. Shit, they might be able to tell him a worthwhile thing or two about the place.

“Fine, thank you boss. And you?”

“I’m good, I’m good. Great weather”.

“Sure is”.

“Are you both locals?”

One of them was clearly a little more talkative than the other.

“Sure are. Born, bred, worked and retired here”.

“Wow, real home-birds then”.

“Yup”.

"I'm just a visitor. Renting the place on the cliff, Arlton Hall".

The second guy piped up, perhaps a little too hastily.

"So you've money, then. American?"

It seemed to have been said without mocking or prejudice.

"Well, yeah, I live there, but I'm originally Irish. From Kildare".

Neither of his new friends seemed to believe him.

"No trace of it in your voice then, son".

"I guess after just as many years over there, you pick up a few bad habits, huh?"

That was good enough for Coot #1, who seized the opportunity to launch into the story of his niece who had gone over one summer as a student, fallen in love with the brighter lights of the bigger cities, and stayed. By the time he had wound the tale to its conclusion, his comrade had drained his pint, shuffled towards the door, and bade his farewells. His friend, now on something of a roll, paid little heed, obviously relishing the thought of having new ears to bend. Malik was more concerned with the lack of liquid in his glass, and the persistent grumble in his belly. He offered to treat the remaining old guy – who had since introduced himself as Míchail, to a pint. In the intermittent time, a younger barman appeared to have taken over, and Malik waved his empty glass as a means of attracting his attention.

"Can I get another double vodka, straight, and a pint of Guinness for my friend here? And if you have a menu or something with food, that'd be great".

He touched his index finger to the neat pile of change and notes in front of him.

"Sorry, the only food in here is in the restaurant of the hotel, and you have to be a guest to use that."

The younger guy – "Eoghan", according to his proud badge, had a genuinely apologetic tone, didn't appear to be enjoying telling Malik that it was so. Maybe he was alright.

"Aw, are you serious?"

"Afraid so. We have bacon fries, peanuts, crisps. The takeaway down the road opens at six, I think. Great food there".

Malik was neither keen on moving nor waiting. It took him a second to compute "crisps" with the brightly coloured packets of potato chips in front of the mirror.

"Just give me a couple of packs of *crisps* with those drinks, please".

He crammed the salty crisps into his mouth at speed, aware of the limitations imposed by his eating on his conversation skills. It didn't matter – Eoghan and Michail were exchanging the kind of easy small talk that seemed to suggest a regular server/servee relationship. And Malik was suddenly happy to be on his own again.

An hour later, the numbers in the bar had trebled to include a couple of agri-workers of some kind, and a man and woman of English extraction, who huddled quietly at one of the window tables, sipping mineral water. Malik felt himself slipping slowly into a numb drunken lull, and moved off vodka onto whiskey, believing the surly kick to be sufficient to wake him a little.

“So where exactly in the States are you from?”

He shook himself free from a sordid daydream to find the fresh-faced barman standing before him with eager eyes. The sudden change in his brain jolted him back into something approaching liveliness.

“Uh, LA”

“Nice. I mean to go some day”.

“Don't, man, it's hell”.

Eoghan laughed, and needlessly introduced himself. Malik responded.

“So what are you doing up at the Hall?”

It wasn't a question that Malik had previously prepared an answer for. He mused momentarily over the truth, and whether or not he would regret telling of his secret isolation.

“I'm writing”.

“Ah, you're a writer?”

“No, no, music”.

“Really? What name do you go under? Would I have heard of you?”

“Maybe. My band is called Sin Sister”.

He rooted automatically in his pockets for a laminate or something with his band's logo on it. And cursed silently for leaving his shit on the bus. And then remembered that he was no longer on tour. The joys of shattering a routine.

“Sorry, haven't heard of you”.

Malik was amused.

“Really. What kind of music do you listen to?”

“Kinda indie stuff – Radiohead, The Manics, you know”.

Whining Brit crap, smirked the vocalist to himself.

“We would move in slightly different circles to those bands”.

“Right. Are you big?”

"Yeah. Last album did four million, still going. Big arena tours, all that".

"Do you tour over here?"

"No, fuck that. Lousy food, lousy weather, and we don't do so much business in Europe. Did the festival circuit at the start of the last tour, you know, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Holland, but that's it. The money is in the States, Asia, they're crazy for me over there".

He didn't notice the surfacing of his ego.

"So why are you writing over here?"

Now here was where he could draw a lying line. No need to give the flushed barman all the information he needed to rat Malik out.

"It's somewhere different, y'know? Different environment, good for the spirit".

"Is the rest of the band with you?"

*No. Two dead, and I haven't spoken to either of the remaining sheep since.*

"No, they're joining me in a week or so".

As the evening wore on, and the frosted window faded to dull grey before the smattering of street lamps kicked in, Malik continued to regale Eoghan between his duties with hushed tales of tour debauchery and rock star excess. Fuelled by a reasonable flow of liquor, he enjoyed seeing the younger man's eyes widen. In turn, he learned that Eoghan was not a local, but spending the summer working in the hotel bar, staying in one of the smallest spare rooms, with the threat of a sleeping bag in the storeroom hanging over his head should the hotel ever fill. His knowledge of the village and its people – mainly gleaned from two weeks worth of daily conversations with the wise old men of the bar, could not extend to any more than "yeah, there are a few cute birds around, two, maybe three but that's it", and couldn't provide Malik with any specifics. He was able to detail the history of the hotel, built around and linking to the pub that had been there long before. The original Duggan had been reluctant to sell, and the eventual compromise saw his establishment assuming the role of official hotel bar, and the new hotel was built in such a way as to accommodate the awkward local. Eoghan also confirmed that the sunken embankment behind Dargan's Lane had once been a rail line, and that an old station had stood where the beach car park now lay. Something about a slowly eroding cliff-face potentially disappearing from beneath the tracks, so they took the railway away from Dunfarring completely. Malik tapped his glass on the counter to order another, wanting rid of the barman, so as he could focus on the open-jacketed, red-shirted man who had

moved quickly into the middle of the crowd. The same red-shirted man he had seen on the street earlier.

He overheard somebody hailing Red-Shirt – “Olé”, it sounded like. In keeping with the man’s foreign looks, he figured. Did that make his younger female friend foreign also? She seemed a little darker than rest of the pasty locals. His daughter? The man ordered a pint, and made his way to Malik’s end of the bar, the only spare stool along the front counter. Malik brusksly offered his hand and his name, before Oleg even had a chance to remove his light jacket. He was momentarily phased by the tall, gaunt and deathly white man, with his unusual clothes and malfocused eyes.

“Nice to meet you”.

“And you too”, slurred the stranger, “how’re you doing”.

“I’m ok, thank you”.

In removing his jacket, he was able to turn to his right, to fix Séan with a help-me glance, asking nervously to escape the attention of the drunk on his other side. He didn’t know him; he didn’t trust him. Séan obliged. Oleg remained swivelled in quiet conversation until his pint arrived. Malik became acutely aware of his own body position, still turned towards Red-Shirt, as if waiting for him to turn back. Through moving his head, he also became aware of the three guys – maybe incorporating the two wide-boys from the car park, he couldn’t be sure. They were circled around the last wooden table to his left, the one previously occupied by the Brits, and were fixing him with some kind of intentful stare. With not a single drink between them. His defences reeled.

“Something wrong, friends?”

Not one of them loosened their eyes. The one guy he definitely didn’t recognise spoke.

“Nothing wrong”.

“Well keep it that way. Look somewhere else”.

“We’ll look where we want”.

There was a faint hint of malice. The ambient sound, though never previously loud, dropped in volume.

“I said look away”.

He wasn’t scared. He knew enough to more than defend himself against untrained punks. And there was always the blade in the inside of his right boot. He hadn’t noticed the original barman making his way silently back through the hotel door, and along the bar.

“Is there a problem here?”

Malik turned at the intruding voice. The amateur shaver's lips had shrivelled.

"No problem".

"I won't tolerate any trouble here. I think you've had enough".

"What the fuck? Who are you to say I've had *enough*?"

The older barman turned to the younger.

"Don't serve him any more".

"Aw, you fucking *shit*".

One of the other young guys to his left piped up.

"Watch your mouth".

Malik didn't turn as he addressed him, hissing.

"Watch your fucking neck".

Murmurs of discontent, and glasses rapping sharply onto wood. *A little more force and they'd break, and we'd have some broken glass to teach you manners with.*

"Sir, please leave the premises".

The shaving grazes were now losing themselves in the orangey-red wash of tempered heat.

"What the fuck for?"

Whispers – did he hear "*because you're an asshole*" amongst them? The barman moved back towards the hotel end of the bar, speaking and preventing Malik from sourcing the cowardly wise-ass.

"You're drunk, you're causing a disturbance. Now please leave or I'll call the guards".

"What fucking disturbance? These assholes are giving me the awkward eye, I'm not doing shit".

"Sir, lower your voice and leave. I'm calling the police".

The three jerks who had started it all shifted in their seats. Making something of it? Giving in and levering himself off his stool, Malik shot them his outstretched hand without looking at them, offering them the opportunity to continue their grievances elsewhere. Even in his state of advanced inebriation, he was capable of remembering just how familiar he was with the wrong side of the law, and how costly it could be.

"Fuck you. Fucking *asshole*. I'm leaving. And I'm taking my fucking drink with me".

They seemed to be relieved enough to be getting rid of him to not worry about the dumb glass. He half-fell across the wooden slat floor, reaching for the handle of the inswinging door, pushing back rogue strands of dark hair that had slipped loose from his messy knot-tail. Looking back to stare out the three punks

one last time, he was astounded to find their table now vacated, and not a trace of their departure; no swinging toilet door, no nothing.

"Where'd those fucking dicks go?"

The small crowd on either sides of the bar had returned swiftly to their own business, and his question went unanswered. If they had taken some secret exit short cut out onto the street and were waiting to pounce when he was not prepared for it, he wanted to know.

"I said, where are those three dicks?"

The senior barman raised his voice impatiently.

"Who are you talking about?"

Malik almost screamed, incredulous and wired, unaware of just how sloppy his words were.

*"The three fucking assholes staring me out!"*

He was offered a sneer that bordered on being evil, and may well have been, had the barman not been bound by unwritten rules of professional courtesy.

"There was nobody there. You're well over the limit".

Nobody there? *Nobody there?* He wasn't that far gone, even though speaking was a wet process and standing still was an impossibility.

"Well who the *fuck* was I talking to then?"

Another gloriously patronising smile, as much hick comedian as bartender.

"The table. Now please leave before the police get here".

He was covering for the three guys, and of this much Malik was sure. He would have told the barman so had he been able to remember the word *cover*, and how to use it.

"Fucking *rednecks*", he offered as a parting shot, and he stumbled out into the dark street. There were shouts to follow – some "yank", some "weirdo", he didn't give a fuck. As he walked back up towards the Beach Café, he turned routinely to see if anybody fancied following him. No-one. No guts. The three fighters were probably hiding in a back room, scared of him. He saw that the takeaway hatch was open, and the greasy smells wafting on the sea air jabbed his stomach. He swerved in onto the small concrete patio, his presence causing the sluttish-looking girl behind the counter to cut short her exchanges with the equally sluttish-looking girl standing on Malik's side of the hatch. Both paused, and laughed, immediately heating his blood. *Fucking trailer-park tracksuit whores*, he spat under his breath.

"Are you alright?"

She sounded as bad as she looked. He didn't even glance at the price list behind her; he wouldn't have been able to focus anyway.

“Just give me a burger and fries”.

“We’ve no burgers, we’re all out. Sorry”.

She didn’t sound it.

“Jesus, what is with this place. Just give me two fries then”.

She turned away silently to shovel sorry-looking chips into white plastic trays. Malik turned, maintaining his sneer as he caught the other girl’s eye. She looked instead towards her friend.

“Salt and vinegar?”

“Yeah”.

She took the containers into each hand, and sprayed the contents of the trays on the counter. Generously. Perhaps enough so to irritate others, but not him. The more the better. Hard luck, slut.

“That’s two twenty, please”.

He took the first note that came to hand from his pocket, thrust it against the vinegar bottle, took the hot trays of chips in both hands and turned to leave. She let him take two steps before calling.

“Hey, your change”.

“Keep it”, without altering stride.

“It’s a fifty pound note!”

He smirked in badness, and called back over his shoulder.

“Buy yourself a new tracksuit”.

He could still hear the occasional whore-laugh behind him as he moved along the sea front, the waves seeming a little muffled to his ears. He rethought his transportation scheme, and stacked the two trays one on top of the other, leaving his other hand free to scoop globs of tough potato chunks into his mouth. The rising vinegar fumes burned his nose, and he was soon grateful for the half-filled glass of whiskey in his ass pocket. Once or twice, he checked behind him for anyone looking to spring a surprise. But the road behind – just like the road in front, and Dargan’s Lane as it pulled away from him, was clear.

The mouth of the forest that welcomed him along the homeward path was dark and silent. In its honour, Malik crunched together the two empty plastic trays, cursed the trickle of oily vinegar that slid down his hand, and pitched the crackling package at the first tree he passed. He swallowed the last of the whiskey, and Hail-Maryed the glass ahead of himself. It smashed dryly against an unseen trunk, bringing a little satisfaction. *Fucking morons*. What was all that about? Turning on him just because he’s trying to talk to that foreign fuck? Ok, so his ultimate motive involved finding out a little about that hottie on the main street

earlier, but they wouldn't have known that. Real protective of their blow -in Olé. What a place. How much longer was he gonna have to spend here? Ben had warded him off even contemplating returning – the music media shits were seemingly caught up in some “Where Is Malik – Is He Dead Too?” bullshit. No powder. No nothing, and no prospects. Right now, kicking his way along the forest floor, scowling at the night animals' faint noises, he just wanted to get home. To plug in and to rock the fuck out. Get the day and the people out of his system. Things were starting to blink and snap around him, and he began droning sounds in his head to block them out. He felt like running. Not because he was scared, but because he wanted to get home. Now. Fuck it, why not run? He broke into a light jog. Something scurried away on his left. He ran faster. Breathing heavily and feeling dizzy. Why couldn't he see the walls of his home looming gently in the blue-black gap in the trees ahead? He kept running, maybe a half minute in length, maybe a minute, and eventually broke out into the open air, his attention grabbed as he slowed by the cold, clear slither of the sea on the cliffs nearby. His breath was shattered. He limped through the gates, and climbed the three steps to the front door. Hating the place a little less than any other time before.

## chapter eight

One eye on the hectic week of accounts that lay ahead, and the other projecting backwards to the breakfast table 24 hours earlier, when he had said goodbye to his family for three whole days; as the morning of the twenty-second dawned in a blaze of sunshine and bird songs, Stephen was looking forward to the weekend of paintballing with all the enthusiasm of a suicidal nihilist. He felt cornered by his miserable situation – he could really do with a distraction of sorts, something to relax and prepare his mind for the coming week. Cementing some kind of a happy, functional bond between the four members of his team was also a favourable point – he remembered some stupid company-circulated email about a study carried out by the University of Sheffield, which totally dispelled the “treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen” theory of old. But traipsing around an isolated moor in camouflage outfits with paint-guns was not how he would have gone about it. Although if pushed, his discouragement could not have found a way to let through any alternative suggestions that he would ordinarily have been able to propose. Instead, with Maedbh scolding him for not travelling with them as her protector, keeping her away from “hairy” Uncle Jim, his ears moaned to hear his wife not bothering to stifle her giggle as she replied “well, Daddy has to go and play war games with his work friends”.

The three stooges had been punctual, pulling onto Stephen’s fresh tarmac in a glinting silver Civic at nine-thirty on the dot. Already feeling the effects of their combined two-hour red-eye trip down the country, they seized the opportunity to stretch their legs, tumbling out onto the driveway, leaving Stephen to debate whether or not to lock the front door behind him.

“You found it ok, then?”

“Perfect directions, how could we not?”, yawned Aidan the driver.

“Off the main bypass, through the village with the red pub, another ten miles along the coast, and it’s the last house on the left of the batch before the forest that we came across after the church, right?”

“Right. Do you guys want coffee or anything, or are we off?”

He had seepingly adopted a “let’s get this over and done with” attitude, and stepped past his reluctance to delay the inevitable any further by having to show them around his home. Another time, maybe, but for now, he just wanted to leave.

“Nah, we’ll just stretch out, and then go. The boot’s open, you can throw your stuff in there”.

The other three moved as one towards the side of his home, making approving noises about the neighbourhood, and the sprawling sea view that exposed itself as they peered around the corner. The small pine cove directly beside Stephen's property served selfishly to hide the ocean from the casual observer, necessitating a hike around to the back garden should one wish to witness its splendour. He stashed his bag of clothes and extra footwear in the back, amongst a handful of holdalls and larger white plastic sacks with "Gorstown PBC" daubed on them in red paint. The equipment, he figured. Quickly exhausting their interest in the exterior, and eager to get the second leg of their journey underway, Kevin led the other two back to the car, where he appeared to be taking over driving duties.

Half an hour down the road, he was feeling a world of difference in his demeanour. Laughing at their jokes, moaning good-naturedly about his girls leaving him on his own for the weekend, and milking the genuine jealousy from Aidan and Derek as he boasted of having seen Bowie on the Glass Spider Tour at Slane in '87. This was prompted by the airing of what appeared to be a personalised compilation of tracks on the car stereo – "Star Man", "Five Years", "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide" and "Ashes To Ashes". What little musical credibility his workmates had earned was shattered within minutes, as Kevin leaned across to replace the Bowie tape with his own selection of dull dance music – without complaint. The four stopped at a reasonably presentable roadside restaurant for a late breakfast, enjoying a large fry per man, and touching on the first of the day's plans. It appeared that Kevin had stopped to consider the comfort of the older man.

"OK, I don't know if you're still pushing for your cosy hotel room, but there is a small hotel in the village in Dunfarring. I called ahead yesterday, they said there's no need to book ahead, they'll have plenty of room".

He left off with an inquisitive eyebrow raised. The other two faces weren't giving anything away, and Stephen reckoned they'd be secretly just as glad of the little extra comfort.

"Well, I'm just trying to be rational about it. I mean, if we're talking about spending the best part of a day traipsing around a moor, shooting paint and shit at each other, you might be damn glad of a warm shower at the end of it".

There were nods and murmurs of what could have been agreement.

"I don't know, what is the plan for tomorrow? Are you thinking of going at it again, or what? I don't particularly want to crawl home mucked up to the eyeballs".

"You did bring a change of clothes, right?"

"Yeah".

He noticed traces of smiles on two faces. Something *better* was coming. So he smiled himself.

"What is it?"

Kevin leaned back in his plastic chair, beaming.

"It's ok, Grandad, we're only winding you up. We have two twin rooms waiting for us in the Strand Hotel. We didn't even *pack* tents, man".

"And no, we don't plan on going out tomorrow either. We figured that one day would be enough".

Stephen was suddenly feeling an awful lot better. And then Derek took it home.

"Yeah, the plan is to spend the day paintballing today, head back to the hotel in the evening, get cleaned up, and enjoy a Crawford Materials Accounting Division Social in the hotel bar. What do you think?"

Stephen thought of just how miserable he had felt so very recently, and of how he had resigned himself to a weekend of cold, wet and childish humour. He thought of how infinitely better these new refined plans sounded. And he smiled.

"I think I can live with that".

They made good time, leaving the sun sadly behind a thin blanket of cotton clouds and impressive mountains. The warmth reappeared viciously a little after twelve, as they skirted around Errishead Nature Reserve, which began at the lip of a vast expanse of gorse, rocks and hilly streams. Kevin pointed to the dark green forest that hovered away in the elevated distance, pronouncing it to be the starting point for their adventure.

"We'll park somewhere along here, hike up towards the forest, and take it from there".

"Are you sure we can run around the nature reserve like this?"

"Relax, Grandad. The boundaries of the park end on the other side of that patch. All this area here is just wild".

And although the distance from the road to the trees was an impressive spread of dull colours and contours, it didn't seem to pose much of a wartime challenge to Stephen. A single white signpost pointed to the turn-off for Dunfarring.

"But there's nowhere to hide on that hillside. That's not gonna be much of a game".

Kevin snorted, slowing the car almost to a halt, and easing it across the main road onto a smaller thoroughfare banked by more deep green sentinels on the right, and a row of white-washed cottages on the left.

“We’ll be active IN the forest. It’s far enough away from the main gates, from the tourist walks and from the security points. Give him the map, Aido”.

Aidan rummaged in the pockets of his canvas jeans, pulled a folded sheet from therein and handed it across Stephen’s shoulder.

“What’s this?”

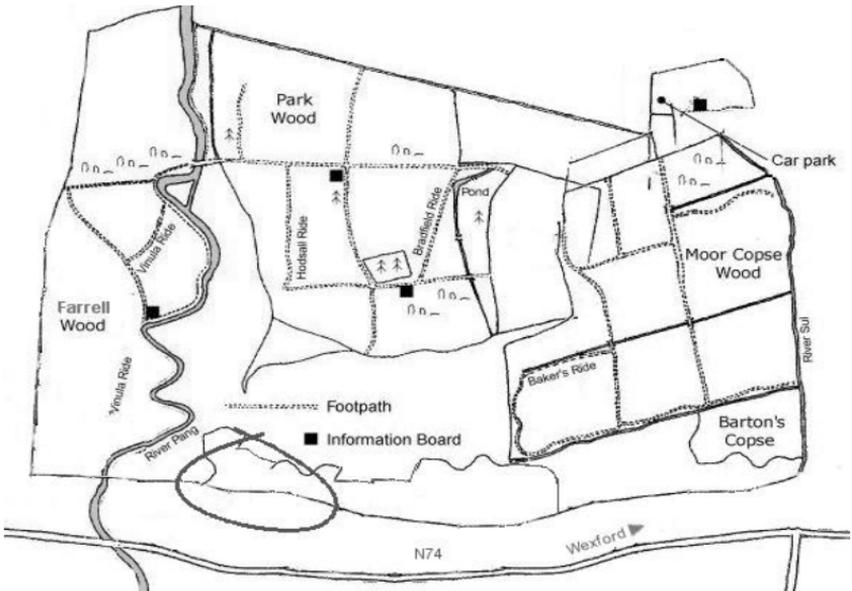
“It’s a map of the park. From their website”.

Stephen unfolded it, and turned it right side up.

“They have a website?”

“Well, a couple of pages on a main tourist site. See, we’re safe enough”.

Sure enough, the clearly marked areas on the map backed Kevin’s bravado perfectly. In amongst the small forest cluster ringed in pen, they would be far enough away from the rest of the park’s civilisation to conduct their faux-military manoeuvres. The furthest of the tourist trails seemed to fall a good quarter-mile short of their proposed combat zone – according to the scale. All they needed to worry about now were animals and surveillance cameras.



The sea gleamed happily at the end of Dargan's Lane, and they swung to the left across a hump-backed bridge, along a tight unmarked road towards the small collection of low-lying buildings and people a short distance ahead. As they purred through the village, passing the beach car-park and two shops facing each other, Kevin loudly assumed that the Strand Hotel would be within shouting distance of the strand itself. He happily vindicated his confidence as the wooden sign on the facing wall of the hotel announced itself. He paused outside momentarily, laughing at the groans of his passengers, before backing up and turning into the small hotel car-park.

"Aw, it's worse than Fawltly Towers!"

"If I find Basil at reception, I'm running".

"Shut up whining, it's only for one night".

They piled from the Civic onto the dusty tarmac, and stretched and yawned in the sweltering heat, marvelling at just how hot it had become. Kevin led the way back out onto the main street, which was beginning something of a bustle; a group of kids moved away from the shop across from the beach entrance, each one swinging light plastic bags of assorted frozen drinks and ice-pops. A family car was pulling into the car park, joining the half dozen already present. Two old men were tipping their hats at each other on the corner. He pushed open the hotel door and moved into the fan-cooled lobby.

Minutes later, they were quickly exploring the interiors of their small twin rooms; both identical - creamy white walls, large wooden-lift windows with sills that could double up as seats, and small work-desks with a colour portable television each. The beds were rammed tightly against the wall, overlooked by a small crucifix and complemented by matching teak wardrobes. With not much to admire, and certainly no inspiring view from their northern back-garden windows, Aidan kick-started the rush by declaring "they'll do", and returning to his own, offering ten minutes in which to change their clothes, derobe themselves of their unnecessary paraphernalia, and make their way to the car below.

Upon gathering outside their rooms, and traversing to the lobby, the four took a quick peek into the empty bar, and shuffled past reception. Derek offered a light-hearted suggestion to the freckled girl at the desk, recommending that the hotel stocked up in preparation for the session that would follow. He and the others were safely outside the door when she responded, so he never did get to hear her accuse him of being a "Dublin tool".

They drove quickly and giddily back along the way they had arrived, through the brief wash of civilisation, following the sea until the road curved away alongside the forest, and back out onto the N74. About half a kilometre along, Aidan pulled in, taking the car onto a natural sandy lay-by, which gave way eventually to the forest carpet. He switched off the engine, and bounded out to the boot, pulling the white equipment sacks free, and began distributing jackets and trousers. All dark navy in colour, bearing thousands of coloured scars, with brand new clear plastic industrial goggles. All four pulled the protective clothing on over their own t-shirts and shorts. The first concerned mumbles about overheating surfaced.

“How do we know which team is which?”

“Simple. I’m with Kevin, and Derek is with Steve”.

“Well how do we play?”

“Simple again. See these notebooks?”

Aidan was holding four small pocket-sized notebooks, wrapped in plastic with snap-button fasteners. As he spoke, he handed out thick felt-tip markers – blue for Stephen and Derek, red for himself and Kevin.

“What do we do with these?”

“I’ll get to that. Right, each one of you take a notebook. Now, every time you are shot by a member of the opposing team, you must stand stock still until that person approaches you, and writes his name in your book”.

There was a light crescendo of groans and laughs.

“Man, that’s stupid!”

“Well do you have any other way of keeping track of the scores?”

“Sure. We take the pens, but any time one of us are shot, the shooter gets the shootee’s pen. Then at the end of the designated time, whoever is missing a pen has to buy beer all night for the guy who has his pen”.

“That’s daft. What if you shoot the same guy more than once?”

“Fine. Just do the points, then. Everybody keep track of their own score against each member of the opposite team. We’ll sort out winners and beer later”.

There was a short silence as the other three soaked Kevin’s idea.

Aidan accepted in a display of mock petulance.

“Fine. Lose the notebooks”.

“Lose the notebooks”.

Aidan turned his attention to the remaining equipment sack, which housed the four paintball guns. He removed the skinny black instruments, hurled the empty sacks into the boot, and locked his car. He handed one gun to each of

his colleagues, and gave them a brief demonstration of the uncomplicated firing technique. His red pellet flew away into the trees with a sharp crack, and probably exploded on contact somewhere in the darkness. He pointed to the limited supply of paint – twenty-five pellets per man, and recommended restraint. They would settle upon a start/finish point as soon as they reached the forest. The end-of-game was already set for somewhere around six o'clock. That would give them time to get back to the hotel, get cleaned up, have a bite to eat, and be in the bar by eight. Perfect. As one, they slunk across the road onto the wild terrain opposite, and began their ungainly clamber towards the forest. Even Stephen had to admit to himself that he was starting to feel a little of the others' excitement.

## chapter nine

Dear Ama,

*It was excellent to get your last email, I know how hard it is for you to get in to the city to that computer café place. You really should say something to your Mom and Dad about getting one for you. Say it's for school work or something. I can use my Dad's any time I want, so it's cool. And don't worry, I have my own email account with a password, so he can't see what we're saying to each other. He hasn't got any protection on his email though so I can see what he's saying all the time! It's kinda weird that all the younger kids seem to know so much more about this shit than the adults, but I guess that gives us some kind of advantage, right? (If you're wondering why I'm writing you a letter instead of an email, it's because this is kinda important and I wasn't sure when you'd next get to check your Hotmail).*

*Anyway, how are you? I'm doing better than last time. I have some great news, I came second place in a competition on the web where kids had to write an original story and upload it. There was one first prize, of a thousand dollars, and a bunch of second prizes – five hundred dollars! I was so psyched when I got the letter. There was an awards ceremony but I blew it off, didn't tell my parents because they'd want me to save the money AND read the story which would probably freak them out. It didn't matter, I talked to somebody at the company who ran the competition, and they said they'd mail the check if I couldn't make it, though they preferred me to be there. So I got my money and a dumb little certificate. They have all the winning stories on their website – [www.arobell.com/competition](http://www.arobell.com/competition) – but if you want to check mine out, I'll mail you a print copy. It's called "Ink\_loop", and it's about an American guy who goes to work in Ireland, in Dublin. He gets divorced from his wife, hates his family, and quits his job to start writing. And that's when it gets really cool. I won't tell you any more, it's better if you read it yourself and then figure it out.*

*I suppose I'd better get to the point of this letter – I'm coming over to Ireland!! In a week, probably the 22nd or 23rd. I'm gonna use the money that I've won in the competition to get a ticket and fly over. How neat is that – I write a story about an American going to Ireland, and with the money I got for writing it, I'm going to Ireland! OK, sounds a bit crazy but I got a reason. And besides, I have the money, and school gets kinda dumb around this time of year, and I'll be only missing a day or two if I go at a weekend. Don't worry, I'm not gonna*

*pressure you into getting your Mom to let me stay with you or anything, and I don't expect it either. I figure I can check into that hotel that you're doing some work in – maybe you can get me a discount or something? Only joking!! If you're worried about my parents, don't be – I have a cousin in college in Baltimore, and he's gonna cover for me, saying that I'm going over to see him play a show with his band. I have it all thought out, it's cool. I wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't! Internal flights over here are cheap, so they'll believe that.*

*OK, so you're wondering about why I'm coming over to see you? Well, I'm kinda not just coming to see you, sorry! I'll explain – you know how my favourite band is Sin Sister, right? And you know how I haven't really said anything about them for a long time now? That's because something happened with them, two guys in the band died, and the rest of them kinda disappeared. Nobody knows where they are. I know that you don't really like music as much as I do, but I totally love this band. I don't know where I am without them. I haven't been able to do schoolwork ever since. I'm getting in so much trouble at home. It's like there's this huge hole in my life. Writing that story helped me a little bit, and I can't believe I got money for it, it was like therapy. But I could not believe your last email, where you told me about the new weird American musician guy in your town? The way that your Dad described him is perfect, the hair, his height, the clothes. He might have seemed loud and angry but his band members are dead, remember? I didn't even have to stop and think, I KNOW that this is Malik, the leader of the band. It makes perfect sense – he used to live in Ireland when he was a kid. He's trying to get away from all the T.V. and magazine people, so he's in hiding. Who would think to look for him over there? Your Dad couldn't remember the name of the band, but he said it was two words. "SIN SISTER", I know. Maybe the rest of the band are over there too, but nobody has seen them. All I know is that when I got this feeling, when I knew where they were, I felt so much better. And I know that if I can get to see them, to tell them how much I love them, and that it will all be OK in the end, I'll be able to get through it. That'll fix this horrible hole in me. Think about it, how much would it mean to them to have me travelling all the way over there to track them down? I wouldn't tell anybody, I know that they don't want the media anywhere near them. It'd be just their biggest fan. So please don't tell anybody else what I'm telling you now in case word gets out. Please don't think I'm crazy. I know that you like your pop music, but take that and times it by a hundred, and that's how bad I like this band. If I don't get to see them, I'm going to die. OK, maybe that's stupid, but I really need to. Please don't think I'm crazy.*

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Hall

*I'll quit now. I don't want you to freak out any more. Maybe you don't want to see me at all, I don't know. I will look you up when I get over there anyway, I have your address, right? I don't know how to get there, but I'll try get an early flight, and I'll find out about trains or buses in the meantime on the Net. If you want me to stay away from you totally, just mail me. Hope you understand even a little bit,*

Your Cali pen-pal,

*Alicia*

## chapter ten

It was the day that Eoghan had been looking forward to ever since she had first suggested it. The day that he had marked in bright red letters as being The Beginning Of The Mend. The first true steps towards righting the year of wrong. His original plan had been to isolate himself, to hole up in the godforsaken coastal village until the hot summer had passed, and he could return to focusing his mind and body on college. He had not been surprised when the dodderly old guy from the hotel called to offer him the four month position two days after the interview. After all, he was easily the most presentable of the four sullen young men lining up their CV's, shifting uncomfortably in their Sunday best. He was a dab hand at filling interviewers with the kind of sweetening bullshit that they wanted to hear, and the old guy with the stammer and the faint smell of vanilla on his breath had been a pushover. A blowover, even. Four months of bar work, with occasional shifts in the kitchen, and the additional title of Dogsboddy-On-Call hanging over him. He would be allowed to sleep in one of the tiny box bedrooms on the top floor, but was expected to settle for a sleeping bag in the storeroom should the hotel ever be fully booked – unless he cared to make alternative arrangements of his own. Free board, free food from the kitchen, and he still walked out with between eighty and a hundred quid in his pocket. The cat had most definitely fallen on his feet, and sufficient distance from his natural habitat to allow him embark on his summer of isolated cleansing. At least that was how it had started.

They had gone their separate ways about eight months earlier, deciding amicably that the strain of attending college and living three bus hours away from each other would be too much. Their fourteen months together had however cemented a bond that would not be broken so easily, and as such they kept in regular contact, through letters and emails, and homecoming celebrations at Hallowe'en, Christmas, St. Patrick's Weekend and Easter. She travelled up home from Waterford for the Heineken Rollercoaster night during Rag Week, and extended a return invitation to him. He declined politely, lying in excuse, but secretly scared shitless of prying around her Plunkett Street flat, her college life removed from his, and finding some trace of evidence of her moving on without him. It had only taken a month or so of falsely smiled communications for him to verify that splitting up had been a mistake. As he learned weekly more and more of the huge changes occurring in her life, and in turn detailing his own, he realised that he wanted to be sharing these terrifying and exciting times as something more than her friend. He wanted her back. Badly. Yet feeding off the reluctance in

her glazed eyes to ever mention the past any time that they did meet up, the futility dawned painfully on him. She did not feel the same. He denied himself the clawing clarity, held hope for a little while, before sinking and attempting to move on. Though he could not find anybody in his own social circle – however extended - capable of holding a torch to her. Equally, he was nervously sure that she would find it an awful lot easier to meet his equal down there.

She caught him completely by surprise by inviting herself to visit him as he worked in his summertime seaside solitude. The flippancy of her suggestion, and the flimsy excuse about using the time to archive sketches and colour washes for her second-year Art assignments didn't fool him. He could confidently project *exactly* what she was thinking. She had turned down the opportunity to follow her friends and housemates to Prague for the summer. And two weeks into the holidays, she was planning to go and stay with Eoghan? It stank of a sweet, glorious possibility, as far as he was concerned. She had finally reached the error of her ways. She was planning to arrive under the friends-and-artwork-opportunity pretence, but would be fiending to throw herself on him, admitting ruefully that the past year had been a mistake. She wouldn't cry, because that wasn't her. But it would be all good, all happy. They would laugh together, glancing back at the wasted year, but look forward heartily to the flexed strength that their time apart would have churned. He awaited the day with growing excitement, checking and re-checking with Sharon at reception, to ensure that he would have his own room for the duration of Sheila's visit. He would do the gentlemanly thing, and offer her without hesitation the use of his bed while he roughed it on the floor. But she would say something about not being stupid, and insist that they were capable of being mature adults, and offer instead to share his bed with him. He wouldn't argue. In the ultimately misplaced figuring that one thing may lead to another.

\* \* \* \* \*

Malik peered cautiously around the corner of the curtain, watching intently as the brown UPS Transit van reversed slowly through the back entrance to his yard. Skidding animal-like on stones, it drifted through the gates, and off away into the forest. Nobody else. Nobody checking. He let go of the curtain, and skipped quickly from the smaller dining room, drumming fingers happily on the doorframe as he passed. Along the hallway, up to the front reception room. Nobody to be seen through the windows. No trap laid. He couldn't help himself, his natural instinct was to be suspicious. His paranoia satiated, he turned back to the half-shoobox sized white plastic package in his hands. Karman Music

Supplies, PA? That wasn't fooling him. He peeled the sticky seal apart, and pulled a brown cardboard jiffy bag from inside. No discernable marker besides a sticker bearing his name and international address. There was a box of reasonable weight inside. He tore the staples at one end free, and slipped his hand inside. A QT11 Quiktime digital guitar tuner – perhaps a little too heavy? Good Ben. *Gentle Ben*. He felt a world of happiness arriving, and slid the box insert out from its dull but wonderful wrapper. And where there should have been a shining grey piece of quality tuning equipment there was a squashed ziplock bag of tightly compacted white powder. His heart lashed itself against his chest. Fucking *beauty*. Plenty. Enough for *two* stays in this redneck hell hole. Forgetting all about the window and suspicious UPS employees and eager customs officials, he scanned the drawing desks quickly for administrative tools. With nothing of use in sight, he took his magical new guitar tuner back down the hallway towards the bright kitchen. The discarded wrappings dropped to the floor somewhere behind him. He placed the bag carefully on the cold kitchen table top, opened it, and fingered a generous hill out onto the dark glass. He bounced across the tiles to the cutlery drawer, and rooted through it for something suitable – his own instruments were upstairs, way too far away. Finding a satisfactory implement, he moved back to the waiting pile. Caught his own eager grinning face in the reflection. Began singing “Master Of Puppets” to the walls as he lived the lyrics in the early Friday morning warmth.

*“Pain monopoly, ritual misery, chop your breakfast on the mirror”.*

In the afternoon, with the hook for what was going to be a killer new song committed to tape, he finally allowed his senses past his tingling nostrils and his racing breath to the bellyache that demanded attention. He was starving. He checked the small grandfather clock on the wall in his makeshift studio. Actually, it was a pretty poor attempt at a studio, but it was enough to get his ideas on disk. Basic loops and undertows of tracks, he could fill it all out in his own slab at home. He had neglected to bring any of the earlier works-in-progress with him. A couple of tracks lying around, maybe he could work them in as well. He had the shit that Guinch had been submitting too, somewhere, more material. No, he was gone. Dead. Why use a dead man's shoes when he could buy new ones? Fuck it, he didn't even need to buy new shoes. He could make his own. This was going to be all his own work. That'd show them. Who? Didn't matter. Everybody. He'd do the album on his own. It hinted at taking basic morphed shapes behind his eyes. And it was shaping so well. Two fifteen? Where had the day gone? Small grandfather – did that make it a midgetfather clock? Or a grandson clock?

Giggling and leaving his mind reign to babble at the lightening speeds it mused itself capable of, he ambled towards the kitchen. Forgetting that his food supply would be just as depleted as it was the last time he checked. It had been some days since his last taxied grocery burst into Wexford. And he was hungry. Very hungry. Had it really been a day? He determined a sudden, focused craving for more of those oily, vinegary chips that he had enjoyed recently. Ah, from the takeaway in the village. Perfect. He slithered back into the music room, flicking switches and cutting short the hums and crackles. Shut down his G3, saving the open track file as 0522. He checked the ziplock bag, closed it, and stashed it in his accessory flight case. Decided reasonably against one for the road. There was the tiniest suggestion of a puke somewhere inside. No point aggravating that. He took instead a bundle of notes from the Vans shoebox perched on his rack, and scowled at the logo. Stupid trainers. His drummer Draim swore by wearing them on stage. Made him look like a sports metal clown.

He walked quickly and purposefully through the trees, wiping the base of his nose every now and then, just in case something remained. OK, so the rednecks probably wouldn't know what it was, probably ask if he'd had a baking accident or something. But he wasn't about to give them a fresh reason to bug him out. Fuck – why was he worrying about them? He was *above* them and that shit. He'd go in, get his food and leave. Maybe pick up some liquor – he couldn't be sure, but he figured that he had to be running out soon. That would mean going back into the hostile pub. A potential problem? Hey, he could do the meek thing. Extreme conditions demand extreme responses, just like Brutal Truth said. Or shouted. No trouble, he wasn't drunk, if someone wanted to make something, he'd just walk. At least until he got what he was looking for. If – with plenty vodka in hand – someone wanted to step up, fine. He was feeling good, in shape, able to stretch. More sunshine lasers, piercing his path. And then the tracksuit girl from the takeaway spoke. "*We're not open until six*". What had his daddy clock said? Two? Aw, fuck. Four hours to kill. A pain in his belly to kill. Unless....why not get a sack of potatoes, some oil, cook up a batch of his own fries? Homemade cuisine. He couldn't do any worse than the wretched takeaway cook. Somebody somewhere frowned at his probable culinary skills, but his stomach grumbled appreciatively. That was that, then. Pick up the ingredients, a little liquor was always fun, and he'd make enough for days. He'd eat like a king for days. A fast food king.

There was a tangible wet smell in the woods as he walked. Quickly and excitedly, eager to get the latest challenge underway so as he could return to his

studio and beat out the new loop that was clanging in his head. Without knowing it, he was suddenly at the village limits, his concentration broken only by a distant screech from somewhere away on the strand. Taking quick stock of the amenities, he figured that he'd be better off negotiating with the cranky old shits in the pub without a sack of locally produced potatoes over his shoulder rather than with. Then again, how well would supporting the local industries go down with them? Screw it – he didn't need their approval, just a little professional courtesy and service, that was all. He moved past the shops, noticing outside one a rugged pile of great white sacks of "new potatoes", as the hand-scrawled signs detailed. He winced at their obvious weight, wondered how he'd fare with the journey home, and gave in to the temptation to check his nostrils once more for debris.

Malik need not have worried. The younger guy, Eoghan, was on his own in the silent bar, polishing pint glasses with a red checked cloth, no doubt preparing for the early evening rush of four, maybe five rednecks. As if to check nervously with his unseen superior, to determine whether or not the temperamental American rock star was still barred from being served, Eoghan threw his eyes towards the side door. Malik countered his own needs against prolonging the enjoyable suggestion of discomfort on his opposite's face. This guy might even appreciate the fact that he was doped up to the eyeballs.

"Hey, it's ok, I'm not looking for trouble, and I'm not staying. I'm just looking to get some take out, if that's cool?"

He was either speaking too fast, or not fast enough, he wasn't sure which. But the message got there. Something resembling an understanding grin on the barman's face... he'd changed his track pretty quickly.

"What do you have your eye on?"

"A couple of bottles of vodka?"

Eoghan was taken aback.

"Uh, all I've ever seen them sell is cans, no spirits really".

And Malik could guess where he was going.

"And you'd have to check with the guy who doesn't like me, right?"

His mild protagonist smiled.

"I should, yeah".

It didn't seem to be the kind of situation that couldn't be remedied like so many others. Malik reached into his pocket, and pulled his uncounted hand of notes clear.

"It looks to me like you have a good stash of liquor on that shelf underneath".

Eoghan didn't need to swivel to verify the American's swagger, but did so regardless. Sure enough, on the bottom-most shelf, rows of clear, green and brown-tinted bottles. Three, sometimes four deep and wide. A good stash indeed.

"Let me take a couple, I'll pay you twice over for them. Replace them yourself if you're worried about breaking rules. If not, just put the money in the till. Everybody's happy".

Eoghan liked the *paying twice over* part of what Malik was proposing. His mind poked suggestions as his eyes skimmed across the bottles on the shelf. He had Sheila arriving sometime that evening, and with a little extra cash in his pocket, he could show her a really good time. Maybe even get into Wexford and go out to dinner. Fuck it, why not? He could take them from the back, do a little rearranging, he'd be fine just as long as nobody had a sudden spurt of stock-taking interest. Even at that, if he had the money in the till, came out and told Graham straight away, it might stand better.

"Just don't tell them that you sold them to me".

"Sure. How many, two?"

Malik fought greed, laziness and restlessness as bottles chinked.

"Can you stretch it to three?"

"No problem".

He rose back from under the bar, two tall bottles of Boru in one hand, and one in the other. Face a little flushed, but then again maybe he was doing something that he shouldn't be doing.

"How much?"

"Let's say twenty sheets a bottle, maybe twenty five, it's gonna be dearer than in an off licence".

"Sure".

He peeled away two fifties and two twenties from the oddly-coloured notes. Damn, they'd even changed the currency since he'd been gone.

"Here's a hundred-forty. Should be plenty to replace the bottles and leave you with a fifty. My gift to you".

Eoghan practically fell over himself in getting the three misted bottles into the used white plastic bag that he'd produced from somewhere under the counter. He moved past the split second worry that maybe he was dealing in uniquely-sized pub bottles, and not regulation retail sizes. With the money in the till, he'd be covered. No need to replace them.

"That's more than enough, thanks".

"No, thank *you*".

He offered his hand to the cheery cheeked young man, shaking firmly as he took the bag from him, nodding to the four flat notes on the counter. Happy with his wares, he followed it in with a wink, and turned towards the door. Leaving one extremely happy and excited barman behind him.

He made his way back up the main street, crossing over at the takeaway to avail of the shopping facilities on the other side of the road. There wasn't any traffic to negotiate with, short of somebody on a push bike about a hundred yards away, and closing in slowly. The sun overhead beamed down viciously on Malik's unglazed eyes, causing him to squint, and to bow his head. The sacks piled in the shade outside the shop looked both dusty and heavy. The hand-written sign looked childish. What was so new about the potatoes? What was so special about that? Why would they be selling old food anyway? He turned to one side to allow a small child brush out past him, and lifted his eyes in the relative protection of the shutter. He glanced past the corner, at the suckling kid making his way towards the beach, and caught the girl in his vision as she stood propped at the far end of the car park, busying herself with a mobile phone. He had to screw up his eyes to banish the wet malfocus, to confirm his target identification. Something leapt lazily inside him. It was score number three of the day, no doubt about it. He stood still briefly, not aware of the curious shopkeeper craning her neck to see who was blocking her shop door sunlight. It was the one he'd spotted on the same street a few days back. The one who'd intermittently caused his expulsion from the lousy wooden local bar. Would that make a good conversation starter? It wouldn't be as tribally easy as any of his backstage conquests, but then again, this one was different, so he could have no complaints about having to go about it differently. His breathing discovered pace. She was dressed a little more formally than last time – medium black skirt, starched white shirt, and her darkened hair bundled into some kind of lump at the back of her head. She paused tapping at her mobile to check her watch. The side elevation of her face seemed to suggest a tiny hint of chubbiness, he couldn't be sure from that distance, but nothing as such reflected in her figure, svelte and sleek. Seventeen, eighteen, whatever – she was plenty old to him. He still hadn't seen her face fully, but he knew anyway. She didn't appear to be in any hurry, giving him no reason to assume that she would not be there at the close of his business in the store. He mulled over the intelligence in approaching her with such a goofy handicap on his shoulder, and his muscles sighed in relief as he decided instead to go for a much smaller denomination of potatoes. Damn, he'd probably be sick of his home-cooked fries after a day or two anyway. No need to go overboard.

The old crow behind the papered counter was as much hen as human, dumpy and fuzz-haired with fierce eyes and a sharp pecking nose. In the surreal silence of the cluttered but well-stocked shop, Malik lumped a dirty plastic bag of Wexford New Potatoes in front of her, and began scanning the shelves behind for cooking oil.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sheila was damn glad of the cool breeze that came sniffing around her like an inquisitive kitten. She was already flustered enough after the sticky hour-long bus journey, and had not been helped when the cheerily rakish driver pulled up at a signpost noting “Dunfarring 2km”, hissing the door open with “this is as near as we go, love”. Twenty minutes later, she was at the end of the never-ending lane, facing the sea before turning towards the bobbling commune of buildings in the distance that had to be Dunfarring village. Slowly, the lazy untapped art snapshot mechanism in her mind clicked, yawning and sending flecks of rust flying, and it was the first of what she hoped to be many landscapes she could earmark to paint. There was a large forest behind her, and the sea mumbling to her right, cliffs that appeared to diminish in authority as she neared the village. Maybe if she turned and walked through the green huddle behind her, she could find something else worthy of working with. High cliffs, trees and sea. Any old ruins would help. The Social Welfare summer scheme was a godsend – gave her the opportunity to spend a couple of free weeks wasting the last of her grant instalments, building up a little portfolio of her own, before returning to slum it out as a janitor in some primary school or something. Having only just scraped through first year by the skin on her ass, she had been confided in by the sole lecturer in college who hadn’t crossed her that year. And learned that maybe putting together some kind of decent portfolio – unlike the one that had almost failed her – might not be such a bad idea, might repair some of the faculty damage done *and* win her some new friends at the start of second year. (And it wasn’t so much a suggestion as more a smiling kindly-worded threat). She trawled through her immediate options for inspiration, and considered carefully the only possible hopes of free accommodation within sketching distance of anything worthwhile. She had no relatives or friends worth hassling living anywhere useful, her budget would not stretch to even the cheapest guesthouse, and June Kay had recommended using the summer to widen her collection to incorporate as many environments as possible. Seascapes, portraits, all that good stuff. Whatever about portraits and the rolling green hills of home, painting the sea would usually require *getting* to the sea. Upon hearing of his impending

summer job, she boldly - outwardly, at least – invited herself down to stay with Eoghan, outlining her academic dilemma and testing his tepid waters. Unsurprisingly, she was not rebuffed, but heartily welcomed. So she accepted, and planned to stay for a weekend, maybe three days, just enough to take some shots, do some drafts, colour schemes, all the basics. Just as long as it didn't get too awkward with her old boyfriend. Just as long as the fool didn't try anything. She was wary enough to recognise the potential hazard.

As she neared the edge of the business end of the village, she noticed the girl standing waiting outside the car park. She was dressed in the routine garb of a waitress, black and white, too plain to be dressy. No harm in asking for a little directions, thought Sheila to herself. There didn't seem to be much to the pissy little metropolis, she didn't foresee any difficulty in finding the hotel, but the less time she spent outside in the sweltering heat, the better. She was already sticky and cramped after her exertions, and could feel her bare arms squirming against the sun. The waitress girl hadn't looked up from her text messaging, so Sheila hailed her.

"Excuse me, do you know where the Strand Hotel is?"

The girl looked up from her hands, a placid look of calm and probable friendliness on her face. Sheila was caught by a whirl of fascinated admiration as they locked eyes. Her question was being answered, the words softly punctuating the sudden float of sleepiness that whispered at her ears.

"Sure. It's just down there, on the left".

She turned as she spoke to point, severing eye contact, shaking Sheila free of the inexplicable microsecond daze. And then turned back to her, smiling. She was drawn instantly to the deeply coloured cherubic gurn.

"Thanks".

She was foreign. No doubt about that. Even though her localised voice betrayed nothing, there was a dark wildness in her eyes, a touch of gypsy. Romanian, Serbian, something Eastern European. She was as fair as her darkness would allow. The girl's smile changed a little, to mischievous or suggestive, Sheila couldn't decide. And there was something else niggling her.

"I actually work there, I'm going that way in a minute if you want me to show you?"

Sheila didn't stop to consider or think; she didn't feel as though she had to.

"Great, thanks".

She fiddled pseudo-nervously with the shoulder strap of her dirty grey Jansport backpack while waiting for the foreign girl to pocket her phone and lever herself away from the telecomms pole. She felt urged to swap names, and pulled her hand in front.

“My name is Sheila, by the way”.

“Hi. I’m Ama”.

They shook hands quickly and gently. Another unforced smile, so easy and natural. With a dawn-like spread on her senses, Sheila sourced her own discomfort – she felt awkwardly so less attractive in the presence of this strange new girl. And the heat was getting to her. The gold tiger-print stripes on her skinfit blue t-shirt seemed to be trapping more of the sun’s rage than anything else. So much so that she feared peeling it up, wondering if matching radiation burns had eaten into her stomach flesh.

“Are you here on holidays, or are you going for a job in the hotel?”

“No, I’m just visiting a friend, trying to do some work for college.”

Ama did not seem to mind the warmth. Sheila knew exactly why she was immediately bringing the painting thing to the surface without the need to. She wanted to respond in calculated kind, to show her artistic worth, to earn back some of the points that she had lost straight away. She stepped outside her ridiculous thoughts for a moment, and frowned at herself. Cocked her head to one side in reprimand, in the manner of a sassied R & B performer. Girl, *what* are you doing?

“What do you do?”

They were moving at a lazy pace, no real rush, the fulfilment of their small talk exchange seemingly more important to both than their shared final destination. Sheila suddenly felt guilty about telling the waitress that she was an artist. Albeit a poor, forty per cent scraping student artist.

“Art”.

If she felt instantly inferior in any way, she was not showing it.

“Cool. Where are you doing that, Dublin?”

“No, Waterford”.

She could have added that she didn’t get the points or the recommendations for Dublin, but that would be suicidal. If she could figure out whatever game it was she was playing. And if she was in fact playing on her own. Instead, she moved past.

“Are you from around here?”

“Yeah”.

That wasn’t what Sheila was expecting to hear.

“Really?”

“Yes. Although I was born in Russia, sorry, the Ukraine. But we moved here when I was young”.

She pronounced the capital R with the tiniest roll of her tongue. Sheila grinned herself.

“I thought you might be foreign. You have a great colour”.

Ama seemed genuinely pleased with the compliment, though it had to be one she was tired of hearing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Malik careered back out of the shop, cramming the potatoes and two bottles of murky yellow cooking oil alongside the Boru. It was a tight and ungainly squeeze, and the bag moaned in concern, but at least it left his other hand free. He turned past the bubblegum machine, and choked a curse gently in his throat. Shit. She was on the move. Coming towards him, and not alone. Her face was considerably more within his range of focus than before, and his innards eagerly ratified all his initial suspicions. Damn, this girl was *hot*. She had a maddening smirk on her lips as she spoke to the girl beside her, eyes either craftily or shyly cocked towards the one in blue. He was momentarily transfixed. Malik moved his eyes reluctantly to check her companion, just in case. He had to be quick. They were within fifteen, maybe twenty paces of him. His heart pounded, and a single breath lost itself somewhere in his lungs, causing him to stifle quickly. He reached instinctively to wipe his nose once more.

He thought he recognised the smaller girl in the blue animal-print top and navy jeans, but quickly concluded that he was wrong. Before hooking up with his dead keyboard whore, his dead guitarist had dated a TV actress back in the States. Great column inches, needless to say, until she came to her wits and left him for a C-list Noo Yawk actor. But she had found her way to a number of backstage parties, seemed no less likely to live it up than any of the others around her. He couldn't remember her name, knew it was similar to some teeny pop singer's, but his brain wasn't going any further than that. The girl he was slowly moving towards was a dead ringer for Guinch's old actress flame. Same height, same faint whispered hint of Asian blood. Ok, so where there should have been a peroxide crop there was a jet black fashion cut, but at least the length of her hair was within scope. Although her skin was considerably paler than her Californian counterpart. *A pale Irish comparison*, somebody muttered. Nothing pale or Irish about the one beside her, he retorted to himself.

This was going to be different. This was going to require a supreme effort, the like of which he had not had to make in a long time. Snapping fingers, and plying an impressionable female fan with booze and dust – now that was easy. He didn't even have to talk. But as the two conversing girls approached him, he felt panic. How was he going to do this? How could he present himself? How could he barge in between them? What was he going to say to her?

"Excuse me".

Wow, that was good. He hadn't said that in a long time; no need to. But damn, it had worked. The two girls stopped, turned back from each other to face him. Two looks of mild surprise, and then something else as they registered his features. He regretted not wearing his glasses. He didn't have anything on, but feared that maybe his eyes were giving something away. His hair was manacled neatly behind his head – couldn't have had it interfering with his strings as he jammed, and he was dressed reasonably conservatively. Definitely nothing left on his nose. He had her attention, now what could he do with it? And was his smile lewd or friendly?

"I'm sorry for interrupting, but I was hoping you could help me".

Who was doing the talking for him? That was just *stupid*. That needed a follow-up, a continuation. Where now? The cute girl spoke and cut short his internal inquiry. He reacted to her voice by swivelling his eyes from the no man's land between them to her own. Her eyes laughed, warm not cold. Not like the other laughing eyes he'd stared into lately.

"We'll try".

His face moved of its own accord, screwing itself into a kind of laughingly embarrassed sigh. As if what he was about to ask of them was harmlessly funny. It bought him another fraction of a second. His seconds-old indignance at the trigger inside made moves towards dissolving. Whoever was pulling his strings was pulling them well. A master of puppetry.

"Um, I'm not from around here, I'm kinda new to the area. I'm wondering if there's anywhere I can pick up some art supplies?"

It had to have been the first thing that came to his mind. He had no control over what was in there or how it was coming out. But at least it was something. Maybe he'd figure out the rest just like this. The short black haired girl looked as though she was going to say something, but turned instead to her friend. Who spoke again. Malik felt no harm or discomfort in leaving his eyes locked to her dark friendly ovals.

"You'll probably have to go into Wexford for that. There's not a lot in the village here, that's about it".

She was touching her head towards the shops behind him, eye contact lost briefly. He catalogued the small hypnotic lilt in her voice. Foreign. Keep her talking. Keep her here.

"Is it far to Wexford?"

"No, not really, about forty minutes. There is a bus, if you don't have a car".

He felt himself grinning, and felt that it looked well. Because she smiled back.

"No, I don't have one. Suppose I gotta go looking for a timetable then".

The reigns of his mouth were back in his own hands. That was good. He knew what he was saying now. And why. Then the other girl spoke, the one he didn't care about.

"Are you an artist?"

A bit of a rude intrusion, he thought. No point in taking offence though. Not yet. Smile instead, and let it develop. Although he and the tanned waitress-girl seemed to be getting along fine on their own.

"No, I'm a writer. I like to paint in my spare time".

Well, it wasn't so much a lie. He did write music and lyrics. And had painted a little. As he had hoped, his favoured conversee stepped in.

"Really? What's your name?"

"Michael Stephenson".

It was the first time he'd used his real name in years, outside of formal proceedings in precincts and courtrooms. Understandably, no trace of recognition on either fixed face.

"I've written the *Black Stars* collection, maybe it doesn't do so well over here".

A cunning but subtle link to the truth, but they didn't look like the kind of music fans capable of making the connection. They would have recognised his accent, and needed not to dumbly ask if he was American. Unlike the stupid barman.

"Sorry, haven't heard of it".

"That's ok".

He noticed with some interest that the second girl kept turning to the first every time she spoke. Without the kind of relaxed ease that came with being friends, with knowing somebody enough to feel safe in their presence. He wondered if maybe they weren't anything more than the most casual of acquaintances. He was a Jedi master at watching people. It was all he had done

for the past two years, watch people. She spoke again, speaker and listener still both smiling easily.

“Are you staying in the hotel?”

“No, I’m renting the place on the cliffs, just beyond the forest”.

That seemed to go down well. Score.

“Arlton Hall?”

“That’s it”.

“Wow. That’s a nice spot”.

“Sure is”.

“Are you on your own there?”

Shit. A trip-wire question. What were his options? Yes? No, I have someone with me. A family? No, my niece who is conveniently around your age is visiting? He didn’t want to be unattainable. He didn’t want to be a married man. Yet he wanted to be trustable.

“Yeah. It’s quiet, peaceful, good for writing”.

About as good as he could do. She seemed to approve. And then blue-shirt interrupted again.

“What’s the scenery like there?”

Ah, the painting shit again? He could do that.

“It’s pretty great. I love the woods, the estate is small but the grounds are well kept. And it’s right by the sea”.

The waitress nodded, and turned to her friend. Seemed that Malik had described it well enough.

“That’s kinda why I’m here, I’m looking for places to paint”.

He was quick enough to smell the faint opportunity, as she added that she studied art, by means of explanation.

“Well, any time you want to nose around my place, see if there’s anything worth painting, go right ahead”.

To their ears, it was probably a kind nothing suggestion from a good-hearted stranger in town. To him, it was the single most important sentence he had either said or heard since “*Guinch and Frail are dead*”. He couldn’t assure himself that where there was one of his blisteringly heated street-mates, there would be the other. If blue-shirt came, would white-shirt follow? Who cared - it was a foothold, and as easy and as unsuspecting a foothold as he could have planned.

“Are you serious?”

“Sure I am. Hey, if you have a pen, I’ll give you my number. Just let me know beforehand if you’re thinking about coming out. I know a couple of spots that you might want to take a look at”.

He didn’t, but he could sure find some if he had to. He was trying to sound as nice and as natural as possible. *I am not a raging pervert*. Convey that by ensuring that they wouldn’t be alone together...

“My agent is travelling down from Dublin in a day or two, she’s something of an art guru, might be able to help you out”.

Ok, it was getting ridiculous. But had worked. The girl was fumbling in the front zipper pocket of her bag. Took a pen and a small notepad from within, offering “That would be great” as she flicked through pages. He called the five digit number of the phone in his narrow hall, feeling the eyes of the other more important girl on him as he peered into the budding artist’s notebook. She scribbled the number down, leaning on her own bended knee, then returned the book to its pouch.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No, not at all. You’re both more than welcome”.

Although he breathed the vital words in a safely carefree way, he still cringed. It would be so easy for her to pick up on him now.

“My name is Sheila, by the way”.

He took her cold, greasy hand in his, his face beginning to ache from smiling.

“Michael. Nice to meet you, Sheila”.

Malik turned to the other, refusing to pass on the potential. And eased his hand gently towards her body, happy to see her still not displaying mistrust, dislike or anything bad. He widened his frank friendly grimace for her.

“Ama”.

“Nice to meet you, Ama. Nice to meet you both”.

Her hand was softer, warmer, and he could feel its scent in his own. Fought the desire to bring it straight to his nose and inhale. Fought the desire to hold it any longer than was polite. Fought the desire to reach for the dark lithe outline of her hips that peeked through the slight billow of her white fastened shirt.

“And nice meeting you”.

He hoped that she meant it. And meant it enough to not feel threatened or weirded out, to want to accompany the other girl whenever she decided to come prowling around his rented cliff-top residence for somewhere nice to paint. It was a long shot, but it was going to have to do for now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sheila couldn't help but notice the change in Ama's grin as they moved slowly away from the pacing American. It was infectious, in a kind of immature joke way.

"What are you smiling at?"

Her brand new acquaintance flattened the patch of tightly pulled hair over her temple, and checked quickly back over shoulder. Eyebrows furrowing comically, she half-whispered her reply.

"What did you think of that?"

Sheila wasn't sure how to answer. Her mouth was curving upwards at a snail's pace, and she shunted her jaw to allow the smile room to manoeuvre. She couldn't help smiling while the dark fair waitress beside her was doing so.

"What, that guy?"

"Yeah".

"Um, I don't know. Why, what do you think?"

Sheila had her concerns. She wanted to take the American up on his offer; she kinda needed to. It was an invitation to check out a couple of places she could probably do with painting. And she wanted her five-minute-old friend Ama with her. It wasn't so much that she favoured *safety* in numbers, because she did not sense anything unsafe. She favoured *comfort* in numbers, more comfort having this fascinating local showing her the way to the cliff-top home than without. Ama's face changed to contort itself loosely into possible unsure disgust. Or something along those lines.

"A bit creepy".

It wasn't what Sheila would have awarded her potential inspiration benefactor, but she wasn't all that surprised to hear Ama say so. Her face had been building up to it.

"Really? I didn't think so".

Ama shook her head, eyes shut.

"No, there was something about him. Maybe I'm wrong. He said he's a writer, right? My father described an American guy just like him, got thrown out of the bar last week. But *he* said he was a musician".

"Well, musicians write music, don't they?"

"Maybe I'm wrong".

"Maybe you are".

She felt a little better as the strange new girl laughed at her mock-firm incision. And wondered quickly once more why she was so eager for her approval.

They reached the hotel, and strolled into the reception area. Sheila supposed out loud that she should ask at reception for the whereabouts of her friend. Ama asked for a name, and congratulated Sheila suggestively and coyly, opining that the new barman was “nice”. Sheila hurried to assure her that they were nothing more than friends, had been more, but were no longer. Ama continued the coy theme. Sheila was good-humouredly having none of it.

“It was nice to meet you. I’ll probably see you again over the weekend sometime”.

Ama was beginning to inch towards the deep red corridor that disappeared around the corner from the reception desk. Sheila moved quickly in word to respond.

“Sure. Look, I hope you don’t mind, but can I ask you a small favour?”

“What is it?”

She wore a sudden interest on her cheeks. Sheila winced playfully in preparation.

“I know you don’t like him, but would you come with me to check out that guy’s garden? I want to see if there’s anything that I can use”.

Before she had finished, the question had brought with it an “I-don’t-think-so” smile. With a touch of understandable “I-don’t-really-know-you” thrown in, perhaps? As though it were a possibly hazardous, definitely unhealthy chore she was being asked to undertake. And asked by a stranger. Sheila regretted asking as her heart sank softly.

“I don’t know about that. I don’t think I’d be any use to you”.

It possibly wasn’t what she was thinking, but a reasonable truth-deflecting excuse anyway. Sheila quickly moved to a light-hearted pitiful whine. To keep the mood easy, and to probe differently towards bearing fruit.

“You would. I’d appreciate the company. I don’t even know how to get there”.

Was that a semblance of understanding on her face? Not enough, apparently.

“You wouldn’t have to do anything. You can even wait outside if you want”.

That seemed to do it. *That easily?* A chink swelled visibly in Ama’s seeming reluctance, and Sheila forced her fingers in to widen it. Her would-be tour guide, at the brink of giving in, sighed in mock exasperation.

“When are you going out?”

Success.

“Maybe Sunday?”

A shake of her head.

"I'm working all day".

"Oh. How about tomorrow, then?"

"Um, I'm on breakfast and lunch shifts, I have the afternoon free".

"Perfect. Will that do?"

"How long will it take?"

"Not long. If there's anything worth doing, I'll go back out myself".

"Ok, I'll go out with you".

"Brilliant. Thanks a million. I really appreciate it".

"What time?"

"What suits you?"

"I can meet you here, say two?"

"Perfect".

\* \* \* \* \*

Malik was already regretting not asking for a second bag by the time he'd passed over the hump-backed bridge. Even switching arms did little to alleviate the searing pain in his limbs. He swung the reinforced plastic carrier up onto his shoulder, and began ticking off the seconds down to when it would be sore enough to request leave. He peered ahead into the tourmaline depths of Quinn's Forest, gasped then balked at the remainder of his journey. He was going to need some extreme pharmaceutical attention just as soon as he reached the Hall. But it was worth the strain on his muscles; it had been a most successful trip. Achievement on the nutrition goals he had set himself, and the unimagined bonus of good, solid, initial contact with the only girl in town catching his eye. Right now, it was in someone else's hands – particularly the black-haired artist's warm and greasy hands – who was not without her charm either. But even if she neglected to bring Ama with her whenever she arranged to come snoop around his manor, even if she neglected to come check it out at all, Malik still had the bones of a friendly conversation starter whenever he next ran into the cute waitress. He had her name, and he could thank her for pointing him in the direction of the best stocked art shop he had ever seen.

He had stopped to sweep dribbles of itchy sweat from his brow when he first spotted the cop. The salt sizzled on the backs of his fingers in the relentless heat, and his initial reaction was panic. He sniffed deeply, tasting traces. He remembered gratefully that he'd left all his shit at home. Nothing on him. No cause for concern.

The cop was small, round and hopelessly out of shape. Red-faced but dry in the afternoon sun, Malik wondered how he was able to wear the heavy navy blazer jacket, gold buttons fastened to the throat. A tie and shirt beneath. Matching slacks and peaked hat, with tufts of curled brown hair peeking out from under. He slowed his pace as Malik approached him, evidently preparing to hail. What the fuck did he want?

“Good afternoon, sir”.

Malik contemplated returning the greeting and moving on, but the cop had stopped stock still, had removed his hat and was pulling at the hair that was stuck to his forehead. Stopped to engage in conversation.

“Afternoon”.

The pudgy-face looked up to catch Malik’s eye, squinting in the bright sunshine that blazed somewhere behind the taller man’s head. Instant dislike.

“If I could just have a word with you, sir”.

“Have two.”

There was something about the cop’s manner, the formal redneck dialect, the firm but borderline polite bureaucracy of pigs worldwide. Malik’s blood bubbled. If he could have his sneering deprecating fun within safe parameters, why not?

“It’s in relation to the incident in Duggan’s pub last week”.

“What about it?”

“I received a complaint from the manager about your behaviour”.

The distaste in Malik’s throat had swollen to a sudden germinating hatred. Ill-focused, in truth more directable at the uptight asshole barman who had forced him to leave, but the barman wasn’t there to scowl at. The cop was going to have to suffice instead.

“Are you going to charge me?”

The cop wiped his brow again, and licked his lips. Within his disdain for the portly custodian, Malik noticed the surrealism emerging. Bent, perverted cops – would it be so out of character for this place?

“No, I am not. I just want to give you a piece of advice”.

It was getting better. Where was David Lynch hiding? Where were the cameras? Malik shifted to sarcasm.

“And what would that be?”

The cop looked in virtual pain, such was his dramatic effort.

“We are a quiet, easy-going community here in Dunfarring. We’re not used to that kind of behaviour”.

“Really?”

“No, we’re not. And it didn’t make you any friends”.

Malik was temporarily dumbfounded by the treatment.

“I know you’re renting the place on the cliff. That you’re new to the village. But you’d make things an awful lot easier on yourself around here if you showed people a little bit of respect”.

“I see”.

Sergeant Ryan professionally yet mistakenly tracked Malik’s response as a thoughtful one. Whereas in fact he was so ludicrously dazed by the stupidity of what he was hearing, he was incapable of saying much more.

“Sometimes it can be hard for a new arrival in a strange town. The people here aren’t bad folk, but if you rub them up the wrong way, they’ll hold on to it”.

Malik felt himself malevolently slipping back towards reasonable normality. He hated the cop’s accent. He sounded as though he was terminally sorry for himself. The same retardedly earnest look on his face, no longer bothering to look into Malik’s narrowing eyes.

“You’ve started off on the wrong foot after that little performance of yours. It mightn’t be a bad idea if you were to apologise to the persons involved”.

He brought his eyes up – one closed, the other slitting viciously at the American’s face. That was it for Malik. He thought quickly, cleverly and nastily. And spoke shaking his head ruefully.

“Man, am I in the wrong profession”.

Not what Sergeant Ryan could have foreseen.

“I beg your pardon?”

Malik adjusted his pace and posture to explain.

“You see, I’m a musician. But I should really be an actor”.

“I’m not sure that I follow you, sir”.

The taller man brought his face a little closer for effect. If it were not an officer of the law he was addressing, he would have brought it a whole world closer.

“Well, I’m obviously capable of pulling off a good impression of somebody who actually gives a fuck”.

It was a long and complicated punchline, but worth every potential verbal pitfall for the look of complete and utter astonishment on the cop’s face. Malik moved slowly out from the man’s aura, ignoring the stuttered semi-threats and coughs of advice that followed, and walked away. Categorically delighted with his retort, no longer minding the pain that resumed its woodpecker’s rip into the muscles in his arm. This day just got better and better. He was in optimal form

for the culinary and musical tasks that lay ahead. He had all the necessary accessories in his hands or waiting for him. With the promise of more to come. Unlike his old Family Values touring buddies in Korn, Malik was not engaging sarcasm when he opined that life was peachy.

**chapter eleven**

Another sharp snap echoed through the trees, dryly and ominously. Spinning and crunching on an uneven carpet of leaves and twigs, Stephen automatically arched his back, wincing his body against the incoming pellet of paint that he knew was so capable of stinging him painfully. For he had already felt the wrath of two of the speeding pellet's brethren that afternoon, one biting into the worryingly fleshy rise around his kidneys, and another exploding gleefully onto his chest, splattering the lower part of his chin with sickly sweet-odoured paint. The suits were negligently thin, he had bitterly concluded. A lawsuit waiting to happen. He could feel a bruise or some kind of rising wound on his back where Aidan's first lucky shot had struck. Why the bastard was focusing an hour of his excursion's attention on hunting down Stephen was beyond the crestfallen older man. Was there not somebody else he could be tracking? This was bordering on bullying. He had not had a chance so far. His blindly panicked response to the latest gunfire was testament to just how far mentally he was behind in the rankings. Any interest or excitement he may have had in their outdoor pursuits had dwindled back to the old apathy, and childish resignation. He was shit at this. That the latest of the well-hidden Aidan's missiles sped past him and blasted impressively off the gnarled trunk of an ancient oak two feet to the left of him was of little consolation. Stephen couldn't track his assailant in any of his birdlike fretting swoops of the proximal horizon. He darted quickly behind another tree, skidded down a crumbling copper clay slope to crouch behind a fallen giant. Not because he had any confidence in securing a reasonable vantage point, camouflaged and capable of taking out the enemy should he put a foot wrong. An hour of failed attempts had left him deflated in his own abilities. Regardless of how awesome a spot he seemed to find, he had not been able to shake Aidan, or even work his way into a position from which he had a decent retaliatory shot. One distanced sniper effort – the bastard had stealthily climbed a tree, rendering Stephen's excellent hollow pillbox useless – and one impossible ambush from behind. He was fed up, tired, and had given up on any hope of even trying to win back points. As far as he was concerned, there was no game or fun any more. No, the only reason he ducked behind his current barricade was because he didn't want to stung by the pellets any more. He just wanted to find somewhere to hide and wait for the stupid game to be over. Then he could go back to the hotel, get drunk, and forget all about it.

Two silent minutes later, a little of his retribution-seeking sulk had poked past the ambivalent lethargy. The rising opportunity to get one safely back on the bully who had shot him twice was tasting well. He didn't even have to

analyse the tints of revenge, or the force of his conviction; it was simple – *he shot me, I want to shoot him*. Maybe his accidental trench - one he spent little or no time studying, one he had miserably contended to be the only choice he had at the time, maybe it wasn't so bad after all. There was a smaller branch about the width of a cardboard insert roll lying on top of the great toppled tree acting as a natural wall of sandbags. Through the tiny gap between trunk and branch, he could see Aidan moving slowly out from behind a V-split tree a good distance away on his left. Gun clamped dramatically to his chest, stepping with his eyes before his feet. He crept carefully from tree to tree, depriving Stephen of any more than a split second of target-time each time. This was the first instance since they had started that Stephen had anything resembling an upper hand. He could see him, and unless Aidan was pulling some kind of bluffing stunt from the air, checking carefully in each direction before moving, he could not see Stephen. If he could, why would he be moving so dangerously in view of the enemy? Then again, what if it was a bluff? What if he was daring Stephen to show himself, to betray his position by giving in to the temptation to take a shot? Was Aidan sure enough of himself to be sure of being able to retreat back into safety in good time, even get a shot in himself for good measure? His arrogance burned in Stephen's throat. It was bad enough to lose, but to lose to a cocky asshole in the process gave a sour aftertaste. Why didn't he fuck off and hunt Derek down? Where was the challenge in continually beating on someone who's already given up? He was moving in a wide circle around Stephen. Within a minute, unless he veered off back into the infernal clearing just behind them, he would stumble upon his prey. Unless Stephen did something about it first. He inched his Maverick gun slowly from his lap up to the gap where his eyes peered out, and slid the barrel slowly through without noise. Just checking. He wouldn't get up. He wouldn't stand and give away his hidden spot. He would shoot from within. If he scored a hit, it was one point back. If he missed, to hell with it, Aidan wouldn't be able to respond straight away. If he did, and hit, Stephen would have to trek – as before – back out to the edge of the forest, to where the woods gave way to the cruel rocky gorse. And wait two minutes before creeping back into the game. Except this time he might just stay at the perimeter. And screw the game. His made mind itself up, he was going to take his first shot of the day.

He waited, counting and watching three of Aidan's tree-to-tree shuffles. Practiced his aim each time, sliding the gun a little to the left, predicting successfully where his prey would appear. Lining up the same shot each time, a square foot of breast. Aidan had another three or four movements before he would safely have passed behind the blocking abilities of the large tree to

Stephen's left. The time was now. He caught his breath as the bully slunk briefly back into the open, and squeezed the trigger. No kick-back, no reassurance that his shot had fired apart from the pungent dark grey steam from his barrel, and the sharp whip crack that sounded so gloriously and comfortingly louder when jumping from his own weapon. And then no more than thirty yards away, an explosion of bright blue as Aidan stumbled in surprise out further into the open.

"Bastard!"

He was cursing at the new wet stain on his chest, dipping his fingers into the half-foot diameter of sticky blue. A bird overhead cackled the score. Aidan raised his head petulantly, hoping to root out his assailant before he had given himself away. It would be the tiniest of moral clawbacks. But he could see nothing but trees and green wooden sunlight.

"Alright, you got me".

Still no sound. His mind turned over thoughtfully. Was Stephen's hiding place really so good that he was willing to pass on his right to crow, fiending instead to maintain his position until Aidan returned for another round, ripe to be picked off again? He continued his scan of the fight zone. No dashes of paint, no crackling underfoot, no disturbed vegetation or wildlife, nothing helping him.

"Steve? You got me".

There was no way he was leaving the sniper where he was. If it meant bending the rules, and seeking him out before trekking back to the edge of the woods to restart, so be it. He was not going to leave Stephen in his most successful position to date. He checked his covered arms for the cleanest sleeve, and wiped it across his sopping brow. The material grazed his nose, causing him to yelp in pain. Sun burn. Already.

Stephen listened to the deflated tones of his workmate, and watched with glee as he twisted slowly from side to side, gun outstretched in the style of a deflated hostage. He had forgotten all about the earlier traumas; his discomfort and his excitement in lining up the shot had manifested itself into something wholly enjoyable. He wanted to do it again. He wanted to see the confident yet nervy approach of the guy who'd taken such delight in shooting him down twice. He wanted to see the split-second glaze of terror as the unseen snapping weapon announced its painty intention. He wanted to see the priceless shock as his own blue pellet burst decisively on its target, the sudden cheery flash of paint announcing a direct hit. He wanted to repeat the action, and as quickly as possible. That meant getting his prey back to the perimeter, and back into the game. Quickly. He was momentarily loathe to giving up his excellent pillbox, but

he was just as quickly confident of finding another. Now that he had the taste. He checked his gun silently, ready to retaliate in case his opponent tried any sour grape cheap shots of his own. And clambered at speed up over the fallen log, weapon cocked and aimed at the fallen bully.

“That’s one back, asshole”.

Aidan’s gun remained away from his side; he hadn’t a hope of getting it into a workable position before the grinning Stephen could offload another pellet successfully.

“Jesus, that’s a bit extreme”.

He looked pathetic. Trying to make a joke of it, but looking every part the toppled super-power. A blue-chested surrendering super-power.

“Zip it, and move it out to the perimeter”.

He was loving it. The sharp upturn in events left his elation in direct proportional height to the depths of the Stephen who had been losing hopelessly a short time ago.

“Man, and this was supposed to be fun”.

Aidan was walking disgustedly away, circling Stephen on his way back through the trees to start over.

“It will be fun when I bag your ass a second time”.

There was a snort of some kind thrown back at him. His ego insisted that it was fear on the part of his opposite number. And he edged off deeper into the woods, seeking out another position from which to attack. Aidan remembered one of his favourite insults, and roared it through the space between them. His high-pitched whine screamed of worried desperation, and all the convicted bravo of a one-armed golfer challenging Arnold Palmer in his prime.

“You wouldn’t score on Leeson Street with a bag of Rophynol”.

Half an hour later, it was all over. Stephen had stealthily stalked the less-interested younger man for fifteen minutes, before pouncing, stamping deliberately on a bone-like branch underfoot, and shooting Aidan square in the chest as he swivelled to investigate. The pellet caught him by surprise, and he tumbled to the ground, taking out dozens of small wild flowers with his frame as he fell. Stephen closed in quickly, laughing at the grounded beast. Aidan had a smile of formal resignation in place, his reddened features thrown to the pale blue sky above the trees. Stephen offered his hand, but Aidan chose to lever his body into a sitting position on his own.

“Two all, then”.

He didn't seem to mind this setback as much as the first.

"Yeah. Could be golden goal, the way things are going".

Stephen looked at his watch to supplement his theory. Three-forty. Shit, it was early.

"Next one wins?"

"Yep".

Aidan switched to his pensive face briefly.

"What if we mix it up a bit?"

Stephen wasn't really all that interested in any mixing up or any outcomes short of pulling himself back from a seemingly insurmountable deficit to win by three points to two. But he gamely gave his nemesis the floor by raising his eyebrows.

"Well, we're supposed to be hunting each other, or at least the two opposite colours, right?"

"Sure".

"Why don't we just turn and go after the other two?"

"Why?"

"Because they won't be expecting it. I take Kevin, and you go after Derek. They won't be expecting members of their own team. We round them up, fill them full of paint, explain ourselves and then they've got to get the first rounds in".

"That's dumb".

"No it's not. They'll be still going after each other. They won't be expecting us to come stalking them".

"What if they've had the same idea?"

"Then we'll all be chasing each other. Either way, it builds to a great climax".

His glorious 3-2 snatched-from-the-jaws-of-defeat victory was disappearing fast. In fact, had disappeared. He wasn't going to sway Aidan. So he went with it.

"Fine. You and me, then? No back-stabbing?"

Aidan offered his hand eagerly, the happiness back in his eyes.

"No, none. Our game is over. A fair draw".

But a moral victory to me, thought Stephen, as they turned away from the lightly paint-splashed tree trunk, and started off on the five minute trek towards where Aidan figured the other two to be at.

They moved quickly and quietly through the trees, keeping low and attempting to circumvent the space they believed Derek and Kevin to be

occupying. Aidan claimed to have seen a flash of reflected sunlight directly ahead, and mused that it had may well have been one chasing the other. If they followed him, he would lead them to their final goal; both unsuspecting losers. Aidan placed his spare hand on Stephen's arm, and whispered.

"They're moving straight ahead. Maybe we should split up, try coming in from both sides".

"No, we're better off sticking together. We can keep an eye on more terrain that way. Four eyes".

Aidan shrugged with his mouth, having not thought of that.

Their tactics discussion session was cut short by the intrusion of a deep, raw roar of pain, emanating from the patch of forest directly ahead. The region in which they had expected to find Derek and Kevin. It was followed by a series of lip-bitten indecipherable curses, and the underfoot cracklings of a large mammal on the move. Then an indignant outburst from the birds in the vicinity, evidently pissed off with the interruption in their lazy afternoon peace. Aidan and Stephen began running without consideration, making a concerned beeline for the groans that continued. Nearer and nearer. All they could hear were sounds of movement, and of the injured person. Skipping around trees and hoping for a visual, Aidan voiced what they both were wondering.

"Was that Kevin?"

"I don't know".

Something burst out from the tight collection of forest away on the left. It was Derek, and he was blindly making straight for the crumpled pile of fatigues on the ground fifty yards ahead, blending neatly into the backdrop of uncaring wood. The running man hadn't seen the two behind him, and slowed to a halt by the moaning Kevin, who lay on his side, both arms stretched to clasp his left leg. Aidan and Stephen arrived seconds later, to the tones of the prostrate man mumbling in short jagged breaths, trying to explain to the man kneeling over him just what had happened.

"What happened?"

Derek seemed reluctant to touch his injured comrade, happy to spill back from the immediate vicinity, to allow somebody else a look.

"He says he's fucked his ankle up. Could be broken".

Kevin gave another choked squawk of pain, and bunched his fingers into a ball before beating down on his thigh.

*"Fuck, Jesus, do something!!"*

The other three looked from one to another, worried and hesitant. Derek was evidently the least useful. He spent more time looking at them than at the clenched length of contortion on the forest floor.

“Does anybody know any first aid?”

Stephen knew a little, but not enough to take control of a fracture in the wilderness.

“A little. I should try take a look at it”.

“*Fuck* taking a look at it. *Get me some help*”.

If it had been human, there would have been an anguished urgency in his voice, a terrible distortion of pain on his face as he squirmed slowly. Instead the words were almost feral. The others winced personally and sourly at his blatant agony.

“Look, he definitely needs help. Now”.

Stephen offered what little leadership he could muster.

“Right. I’ll stay here, do what I can. You two go and get help. Go back to the car, find a phone, and get some help. Tell them we have a possible fracture”.

“It *is* fractured, it *is* fractured!!!”

There was no “possible” as far as Kevin was concerned. Their delays and their indecision was getting to him. Not that he was in a position to reprimand his own stupidity, but it had been the injured man himself who had campaigned to have all mobile phones, wallets and unnecessary accessories removed from their persons for the duration of the game.

“Why don’t we just try and find a security guard, get them to get help?”

Stephen felt like punching Derek’s useless panicked face. He was prolonging the situation by needlessly finding fault with the only plan of action being put forward.

“Do you want to stumble around trying to follow a fucking map right now? Just turn right here and make for the road. As soon as you hit it, turn right. The car will be somewhere there. You’re guaranteed to find that, you’re not guaranteed to find a fucking security guard, ok?”

Despite their sudden relapse into childhood hopelessness, and their desire to whimper unhappily at being shouted at, Derek and Aidan turned sharply on their heels, and jogged out of the clearing, back through the trees towards where Stephen had told them the road was. He barked some more brief instructions after them, his voice breaking slightly and his words muffling themselves behind his body as he stooped over Kevin again. But the other two men understood nothing; they were already breathing with difficulty, hurdling legs

and fallen arms of trees, snapping and wheezing as they jumped through the woods. Without conferring, they both knew that they would not be stopping or catching their strides until they reached the road. They ran for two long hot minutes, their own whistled pants rising in their ears, sweat creeping around their unfit faces, and their legs beginning to ache unfairly. The sounds of injury had been left long since behind, but the graphic vision of their comrade in such pain was of such tremendous resolution they could not shake it from their eyes. Not even the Herculean blast of sunshine that welcomed their burst from the forest's edge out onto the uneven moor could ease their panicked professionalism. The sea lolled silently away on the horizon, deep blue behind the green, grey and yellow of their close terrain. They were both gurgling dryly with the sickly music of asthmatics, fighting stumbles and the sharp jutting rocks that seemed to leap out and slash at their shins. Feet heavy from the sapping run through the undergrowth, they were unable to do any more than protest pitifully as jagged granite bit into warm strained flesh, their pace picking up on the decline, and relenting again with each and every bump. Their heads began to throb as they neared the road at the bottom of the slowly sloping hill, necks whiplashing violently on the bobbled descent. The sun was showing no mercy, and neither was the small foot-wide stream that moated them and their aggressor hillside from the emergency service road. They both dragged themselves to a halt, dealing with the extra inertia that had carried them downwards so much more quickly. They grabbed each other's arms, cherry-faced, breathless and streaming with salty perspiration. Words were truncated with new syllables as delimiters, neither understanding the other, but both recognising that their huge effort was but a preliminary round for the championship that lurked. A series of tasks to assist their fallen friend that had no room for them to pause, inspect their own minor injuries, or discuss their plan of action. With little more than a few encouraging words, still struggling to retain useable breaths in his own pained chest, Aidan led the way in stepping over the small stream, inhaling deeply with pleasure as cool jets of air pierced his steaming groin as he straddled the infant water beneath. He turned briefly to wait for Derek to do the same, and turned right. The road seemed to arc away on both sides, disappearing out of sight more finitely on the left. He wasn't sure if he remembered such a dramatic bend on the way out, but then again he probably hadn't been paying a whole heap of attention. Stephen had told them to turn right and he seemed to know what he was doing. He began jogging away from Derek who was struggling a little more. There was a dead heat on the tarmac that made every movement a wet one. Fuck it, he'd worry about the discomfort later on. Somebody else was in a much worse position, and it was currently up to Aidan to do something about it. He

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Hall

shouted angrily back at his assistant, who was doing little to catch him up. This rescue mission had no time nor place for weakling stragglers.

**chapter twelve**

It really was every bit as green and as friendly-looking a country as TV and mythology had led her to believe. Her eyes were glued to the passing countryside as the badly-conditioned bus tore along smooth but narrow two-lane roads, cutting through huge fields divided by messy bushes and lonely trees, giving way to tiny cluttered villages before fading back into a canvas of grass and nonchalant animals. In the villages, she would smile at the people sweeping their paths or sunning themselves in the evening heat or picking up their groceries at stores that looked for all the world like somebody's home. Some would ignore her, others would stare, but a few returned her wave, and her smile would widen. Maybe her lousy success rate was down to the semi-tinted windows of the bus? Maybe the old people weren't used to seeing girls with oddly-coloured hair waving at them from buses. If not, and if they disapproved, screw them. In some of the bigger towns along the five-hour journey, she identified the Irish equivalence of her kind of freaks hanging on street corners, talking and laughing, flour-skinned gothics and baggy-trousered spike-hairs getting along easily and happily unlike their warring American cousins. Alicia fought the tiny urge to hop off the bus to introduce herself as one of them. She remembered instantly her reason to be where she was, and swallowed excitement hard. What an introduction that could be; although it would have to be one she could only dream of doing. Her odyssey was a private one, an epic pilgrimage that could not be diluted or lessened by accompaniment. She was sure that Malik would not appreciate the extra intrusion either, not to mention the risk of a bumpkin Irish goth inadvertently alerting the world to his hideout. Regardless, the opportunity to ruin things for herself and her hero would not present itself; the bus stopped only in towns to swap departers for boarders, and settled instead for a half-hour rest stop at a bizarrely isolated and dusty twinning of pub and service station. Munching on a warm salad roll, she felt an unusual freedom and happiness, one that had swollen in her chest ever since the 'plane had touched down in Dublin. Free from home, from her parents, who at that time suspected nothing more than that their daughter was winging her way across the States to her cousin in Baltimore after her day at school, having spent the night before across town at Jamie's, working on their joint IT project. Whereas in fact she had spent the previous evening and her ditched school hours battling domestic trains, international timelines and the onset of jetlag, flying overnight and through a light but sticky four-hour stopover sleep in JFK, NYC, from LA to Dublin. There had been a bus that brought her straight from the arrivals lounge right into the main bus terminus in the city. The inward trip had been something of a disappointment, all concrete and development, none of the wandering agri-

scapes she was looking forward to witnessing first-hand. Having been dropped off just outside the bus station, she had not been required to venture any further into the city, which was fine by her. In the distance, it looked hot, crowded, and puzzlingly bad-tempered. After a lot of frowning at the giant black and red electronic information board, beating a sudden mild anxiety attack as she browsed one Irish placename after another, she managed to determine that there was a bus to Wexford leaving in an hour and twenty minutes time. It was the nearest major city to where she needed to get to, and one that her Irish pen-pal spoke of regularly, so it was unanimously her next destination. She ambled into a small newspaper booth, bought a glossy magazine advertising a peek at the home of some rugged looking guy draped across a garish bed, and settled into a seat to wait and read in the huge impersonal window-walled shed.

The bus was by no means full, leaving her with plenty of leg-room and sufficient space to stretch her frame out and sleep, if she had so chosen. But the lure of the evening-shadowed countryside once they had left behind the suburbs of Dublin was too much. Her body was racked by sleep and a congealed knot of emotions, but her tired eyes stayed happily open to take in the rushing environs. By her reckoning, it would be 10pm local time when she arrived in Wexford. Which would be about 2pm in her time back home, eight hours difference. But if it was only 2pm, why was she feeling so tired? What time would it be at home if she was to get on a 'plane at that minute and fly back? It'd probably only be something stupid like an hour later, even though she had spent hours and hours travelling. She puzzled over this for a few minutes before realising that she had lost a whole chunk of the night before. It felt like late on Friday, because she had spent all of Thursday night and most of Friday travelling. It did not feel like lunchtime, which is what it really was. Her body groaned in confusion, and she promised it a nice shower, and a good night's sleep just as soon as she got to her hotel. She was going to make her way to Dunfarring from Wexford when she got there, and worry all about looking for Ama and Malik the day after. Which would still only be night time of the afternoon she was driving through back home. She giggled to herself at the stupidity of it all, and returned to her living, breathing puppet show in which the trees and the fields were the star attractions.

There was a nasty, tear-inducing surprise waiting for her in Wexford. The confusion over time zones, the lengthy streaks of exhaustion in her muscles, and the constant bubbling shred of guilt at the extent of her parental deception spilled over into a wet display of misery that shocked the moustachioed guy closing the ticket office. He was drawn instantly and inexplicably to her quandary;

she was grubbily attractive in a way he hoped his own teenage daughter would never be, and he felt a certain knightly duty to do immediately what little he could to help and to lessen his own burden of having just told the blubbing senseless American that no more buses would be running from Wexford station that night. To anywhere. There was no harm in asking a question or two, he figured, quickly flicking his eyes around the yard to check for any interested work colleagues that might have remained. They'd be the worst, they'd be the ones to worry about. Who cares what the passengers saw? Besides, she wasn't crying loudly enough to draw attention. With her head bowed, he noticed the odd colours in her pinned hair.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

He would have sworn there and then to any judge's face that as she looked up, she seemed to be edging her way into his arms. Arms that were blatantly sending the wrong signals; professionally courteous, not a Samaritan's consoling spread. Or worse still – those of a grown man with a thing for hugging strange teenage girls. He stepped backwards quickly and firmly, darting his head and hands to check needlessly on the locked door of his temporary Portocabin office. He intended that it made him look a little less jumpy. She hadn't answered, had only lifted her red eyes to pause sobbing and to gather herself, so he tried again. At distance.

"What's wrong, are you in trouble?"

She gasped as she rubbed her face dry, smears of something darker lining the tops of both cheekbones. Probably mascara, or eye-liner. Although it was dark red in colour. She looked pretty weird anyway.

"I'm sorry. I was just supposed to get to Dunfarring tonight".

There was still a good deal of light left in the evening, even though the clocks and her adjusted wristwatch had moved past ten. If it had been a little darker, perhaps she would have panicked a little more proportionally. Ed Doran slipped accidentally back into cold uncaring public information mode.

"You've missed the last bus to Dunfarring by a good deal, Miss. The last bus left at seven".

The resultant relapsing scrunch of her settling face – though painfully unnecessary – was sufficient to drag forth the human in Ed once more. He altered his tone accordingly.

"Why do you have to get to Dunfarring? Are you staying there?"

She regaled him with what appeared to be a strange mix of a yawn and a sobbed sigh, and set about sniffingly adjusting her appearance.

"Yeah. Supposed to be".

"Well, I'm sorry. I suppose you could get a taxi out there. Maybe you'll be lucky enough to get someone to share, but I doubt it".

"How much will that cost?"

"Forty or fifty quid, depending on who you get. But it's only about a tenner to stay in the hostel, then you can get the bus out in the morning".

"Tanner?"

"Ten pounds. St. Anne's Hostel, it's signposted there at the entrance to the station".

She simultaneously seemed to be cheering a little and wrinkling her nose as she caught his eye sheepishly.

"Is that..like...safe?"

"The hostel? Oh God, yes. It's where all the young people stay when they're coming through. A lot of them go on down to Rosslare for the ferry, or might have just got off it and come up here looking for somewhere to stay. Perfectly safe".

He was finding it ridiculously easy to talk to and assure the tired traveller. And she seemed grateful.

"I'm sorry for crying like that. I'm just really tired".

The bashfulness was spreading. Ed found himself warming to the conflict of moods, caught himself doing so, and decided that the best thing to do was to get rid of the stranded girl quickly. As safely and with as an assured peace of mind for himself as he could guarantee, naturally.

"That's ok. Don't worry, if there's no room in St. Anne's, they'll direct you to another. You won't be on the streets".

He began moving around her, giving her something of a wide berth, yet suggesting gently that she also begin making her way from the now -empty bus yard. It was time for him to be getting home, not standing alone in a darkening yard with an oddly-presented teenage girl showing way too much skin for her age. To his mortification, she span around in time to walk by his side, pressing him for the departure times of buses to Dunfarring in the morning. Five buses, 10am, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 7pm. He made a great show of crossing over in the opposite direction to which the St. Anne's signpost was pointing, and drew her attention to her impending route. He knew that he had helped her out; he didn't need her fawning gratitude.

"Hey, thanks a lot. I don't know what I'd have done if you weren't here".

That made him extremely uncomfortable. He continued to move away.

"It's nothing. Good luck, now".

"Thanks. I guess I'll see you tomorrow if I need a ticket, huh?"

He didn't answer as she turned and bounced lightly down the quiet city street. Something clanged metallically in the black arch of the stone bridge looming quietly behind him, probably some of the construction worker's crap. He winced at the possibility of a light-hearted babble from her as she came looking for a ticket the next day, refreshed and no longer unhappy. The teasings and ribbings that would follow from the others in office. Damned effervescent Americans. She had been bawling her eyes out two short minutes ago, he marvelled bitterly. And cursed himself viciously for being unable to take his glassy eyes off her tightly wrapped figure as she stepped further and further away, backpack strapped and bobbing.

The nervous but kindly ticket man had been spot on; it cost Alicia ten pounds up front for a bed that night in St. Anne's hostel. For her story-earned dollars, she had the use of a small, cramped bathroom, and a berth in a long weird room which housed about twenty-four mattresses thrown into two rows of twelve on opposite sides of the room. Each row was encased in wood, with a small lip at the foot, and a sloping ceiling overhead, giving the impression that all twelve mattresses – and indeed, if the hostel's girls' dormitory were ever full, all twelve females, were sleeping in the one giant quasi-futon four-poster bed. As it was, there were two groups of three older girls sharing her room, both at opposite ends on the other side of the room, both keeping decidedly to themselves. She didn't mind; after sawing her teeth clean and sweeping the day's intercontinental grime from her face, she was ready to sleep, and clambered carefully back under her blankets. Being not used to sleeping so close to the floor, it took her a few minutes to rearrange herself psychologically, before she dropped off and away into a green, happy world where buses drove all night, but the helpful guy from the ticket office refused to let her parents get on the bus because they weren't cool enough.

The next morning, she was horrified with herself for sleeping so long and so soundly. It was almost eleven when she woke, and she was on her own in the sun-washed dorm, the other travellers having left in silence, or at least with insufficient noise to poke her from her depth of slumber. There were tell-tale noises of cleaning and vacuums coming from the boys' room next door, and she pulled herself quickly from the w arm makeshift bed, not wanting to be the lazy shit still dozing while unimpressed cleaners were forced to work around her. Besides, the day that lay ahead held in its talons the exciting possibility of perhaps being the most important in her short life thus far. OK, so missing the first bus was a pain in the ass, but there was one at 1pm, she remembered. That would do. It

gave her the afternoon and the evening to do what she had come to do. The next day would be Sunday. Shit, the day she was supposed to fly back to the States. She pouted sleepily at the unfairness of it all. At the end of it, she would have spent two full days travelling just to spend one day away. That was a bad return. She could not have risked leaving her return flight any longer; she had to get back to her parents on Sunday evening to fall back into her role in the charade she had spun about Baltimore. Any suspicions or slip-ups and she was dead. There was a clatter in the hall outside that sounded disturbingly nearer. She became acutely aware that she was standing in the walkway space between the beds, rubbing tough grits of sleep from her eyes, and stretching in her underwear. She leapt quickly back onto the mattress, and began dressing herself.

With almost two hours to kill, she wandered into a small coffee shop and helped herself to a light breakfast. She was way too excited to eat anything, but enjoyed the smells of the other patrons' food, and fiddled with her own colourful tray in between mouthfuls of fiercely strong coffee. It was a blazingly hot day, and from the murmurs of those around her, she understood that it was something of a heat wave they were in the middle of. It was nothing new or unusual to her, and she had noticed the locals struggling a little more in the heat than she was. Back outside in the sunshine, she wandered up and down the docks, wandering as far as the bus station as a time-trial precaution, passing the huge bay-spanning bridge and a bright red steel trawler that advertised itself as a maritime museum, and stood back in concerned awe as a great lumbering orange train wheeled slowly along the rails she had assumed were disused. The railway ran the length of the waterfront, continuing triumphantly along its arrow straight path even when the road veered off back towards the town, having run out of land to support itself, before rejoining with the post-bridge tracks after a wide semi-circle of nothing. It was the strangest urban rail setting she had ever witnessed, and she gave in to the temptation to fish her camera from her backpack, to preserve the sight of the long passenger train ambling powerfully away, mere metres from the water drop on one side, and mere metres from the rest of the town on the other. It pointed her mind towards a kids' story her youngest brother had insisted she read to him each night for a month two years before, in which a friendly giant had moved into a peasant village, and co-existed happily with all the normal-sized people. To visitors, the very idea of the villagers moving about in their everyday way, neither moved nor disturbed by the threatening presence of the huge man, was bizarre in the extreme. Likewise, on that sunny Saturday morning Wexford waterfront, the locals seemed not to give a rat's ass about the

hissing orange and black iron snake that edged its way along their old wooden boardwalk.

If she had catalogued complaints about the bus in which she had travelled from Dublin to Wexford, they were all deleted from her scowl to make room for the gripes that were to follow. The vehicle she was expected to board for the last leg of her journey was an abomination of transport laws. Whereas before there was bad air conditioning, now there was none. Whereas before there were sweet comfortable seats with neck supports and dainty white napkins, there were now rough carpet-covered orthopaedic chairs that itched her legs as soon as she sat down. Whereas before there was a thin, silver and cheerful driver chatting up the four elderly ladies occupying the first four seats of the bus, there was now a slobbish and sweaty middle-aged guy. One who sighed spectacularly when she whispered that the ticket office had shut for lunch, hence requiring him to go digging for his ticket book and a pen. He grunted something about listening out for the call for Dunfarring, before shooing her down the aisle to make room for the other four people boarding his vehicle. She was also mildly upset to note that on the already crowded bus – which obviously hadn't originated in Wexford – she would not be having the luxury of a double seat all to herself. Instead, she squeezed in beside the least offended-looking of the first dozen fellow passengers, a surly looking guy more interested in his Gameboy. She opted initially to hold her bulky backpack on her lap, but reacted to the cacophony of sighs and ticks as people moved by brushing off it to stand up and cram it into the luggage rack over her head.

An hour later, she was lost in her own thoughts, reacting slowly to the gruff call for Dunfarring as the bus slowed to a halt. Three other people from the back of the bus shuffled to the front, but Alicia was seeing nothing more around her than road, rocks, trees and a signpost detailing "Dunfarring 2km". Nothing to suggest that she should be alighting there. The sea waved bluely in the distance to her right, as if to assure her. Seconds later, she stood up automatically, feeling panic rise once more in her lungs as the door closed and the bus pulled off. She turned to the old woman in the seat beside her, who was watching her with interest.

"Um, this bus goes to Dunfarring, right?"

It may have been a smug grin on the old woman's face, then again it may have been kind. The gentle booms in Alicia's ears wouldn't allow any clarity.

"No, that's the stop just there. You'd better run".

Run? Run where? She stood still, mouth open, needing further instruction.

“Go, go, get him to stop now”.

The purple-rinsed old lady was motioning with her finger towards the front of the bus. It hit home, and Alicia turned and bundled her way towards the driver. Her fingers grazed his shoulder as she steadied herself on the back of his seat. She felt hot.

“Sorry, can I get off here?”

He moved his head slightly to check the intruder in his mirror.

“I thought I told you to listen for the call”.

There was an evil harshness in his voice that sank her heart. For that split second, she accepted that he wasn't going to let her out. He was going to keep her prisoner on his stuffy smelly bus until the next stop. She was never going to get to Dunfarring, to Ama, and to Malik. She stuttered what little she could, uselessly.

“I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't.....”

Without seemingly moving his body, or altering his facial expression, the driver brought the bus to an abrupt whining stop. The door hissed nastily to her left, and cooler air drifted in on the stale. She suddenly remembered her backpack, and covered the six steps to haul it from the rack. There was another hot crescendo of disapproving noises, but she was deaf to them. She couldn't bring herself to look at the driver as she skipped down the steps. He was still staring straight ahead.

“Thank you, thank you”.

He reached for the door lever just as soon as her hind was free.

“I won't stop again next time”.

She turned and watched the door snap shut, and the bus pull off again, with its disgruntled passengers making a point of frowning out the window at the weird little source of their delay. Alicia felt hot, bothered and sticky. The walk back as far as the signpost for Dunfarring was too much for her, never mind however long it was going to be into the village from there. For the first time, she began to wonder if her trip was really going to be worth it, and started walking back along the road towards the badly marked – if marked at all – bus stop.

**chapter thirteen**

For more than one reason, Sheila felt like tracking down and shaking the hand of the mystery local who had dealt his own brand of swift justice in an unspecified Wexford nightclub the night before, reacting instantly to the drunken yet disrespectful comments made in his direction by Aaron O'Brien. The resulting punch had been powerful enough and sufficiently targeted to dislodge the tragically big-mouthed assistant chef's brace, and as such he was forced to spend his early Saturday afternoon waiting and hoping for some kind of vacant slot in his dentist's time, flicking through colourful golf and property periodicals, and reminding himself repeatedly just how unreasonable the brawny farm hand had been. Because of his unfortunate but necessary dental absence, Eoghan was called in as replacement, and expected to work in the steaming kitchen during the warmest part of a very warm day. It was growing towards being the most ridiculously unfair weekend of his life. Not only was he now resigned to sweating painfully over steaming pots and pans while egoistic cooks in their pyjamas shouted at him, Graham the bastard had exercised his judicial and stipulated right to call back the time off Eoghan had requested for the Friday evening. Hence he had been relegated to asking Sheila to spend her first night in Dunfarring sitting at the bar, and he spent a horrible (and unusually busy) evening bouncing back and forth between exchanging numb titbits of the smallest small talk with her, and serving his thirsty customers. She didn't seem to mind so much, slowly drinking herself giddy on generously over-filled shots of whiskey and Coke. He worried long and hard about the possibility of her leaving his occasional company to join the four neanderthal pricks in the corner, the four who were something of a tiresome weekend fixture in Duggan's. To brazenly act upon their repeated tactless stares, to invite herself to join their table and to challenge their rude interest in her didn't seem beyond Sheila that night. Ever since her arrival, and the apoplectic double-take Eoghan had succumbed to upon seeing her hair, she had seemed a little more confident, a little more assertive, and a whole lot more scary. It had been two long months since she'd last been home, tied up with exams and something else she had tactfully hidden from their sparse correspondence. There had been no mention or warning of the annexation of her long black tresses, and Eoghan neither approved of the surprise nor of her new power haircut. It was the beginning of what would grow to be a consuming discomfort, one that gathered volume as he learned snippets of what she had been up to at college. The more she spoke, the less she seemed like the Sheila of old, and the more she morphed into a vision of streetwise suss, of complete independence, and a social mover light years from Eoghan's own ranking. Even

her voice had changed, and he couldn't decide whether or not he liked her unfamiliar clothes or the way she now wore her makeup. His heart sank without giving a reason, and his mood deteriorated into an unsure miserable hang, one which peppered her pissed good nature with annoyance and intolerance. He swiped a couple of cans of Harp from the fridge in a desperate attempt to shake himself backwards, thinking that maybe on their own in his room with no distractions, he wouldn't be so disturbed by her, but to no avail. An hour later, they were both asleep, he on the floor and she in his bed, feeling a little the worse for wear, and completely pissed off with the way in which her host was acting.

It was, she suspected, exactly what she had feared. The idiot was moping around like a wounded pup, wearing what he probably thought was a brave smile to hide the fact that he was doing the ridiculous spurned lover gig. As the night had progressed, and the whiskey kicked a little more every hour, she scraped sadistic pleasure in seeing his face freeze and drop in response to some of her exaggerated tales. Drugs, three-day-long benders, and the reputation her flat and its inhabitants had earned for being easy. It had not been her intention to shock or to upset him in any way, but with his insistent barely-hidden lovesick nonsense, he was drawing forth the worst in her. It was pathetic.

In the morning, she woke to the usual peals of pain that her hangovers clanged with. He was already up, sitting on his blankets fully clothed and reading a John Grisham paperback. His greeting was a happy smiled one, but she remembered quickly and silently the deterioration of his face the night before, and buried her own in the pillow, wondering what kinds of tricks he had planned to pull on her that day. Dinner, walks, candlelight? Was he really that retarded? Was she really going to have to firmly beat down his cheese, and say what should not have to be said? She glanced at the digital clock on the bedside locker; 11:43. She scoured her pounding temples for her impending timetable for the day, if any. Instantly, 2 o'clock meant something. Shit, painting. Of course, the reason she was in the shitty little town in the first place. The American guy's house on the cliff. In the confines of the bed in the small and stuffy room, it seemed to be a strange appointment to have made. But one that she didn't really mind honouring as long as she had her new Russian friend Ama for company. If it took an hour to get there and an hour to get back, and all for nothing, it was still two hours away from the uncomfortably silent young man on the floor. At that point in time, she viewed him as being dangerous, as being capable of doing or saying something stupid that was going to have to be reprimanded. If she could avoid some such confrontation, she would. She had the American guy's number, but she decided

against ringing. What if today was not suitable for him? What if she had to cancel, and spend the entire afternoon back at the hotel? She recognised the bitterness in her thoughts, and entertained momentary guilt before concluding that *he* was making *her* feel extremely uncomfortable, and didn't deserve her sympathy. She was going to the forest place regardless. She'd say that she'd lost the number or the notebook or something, or been unable to get through. Cover her ass for all eyes to see.

Her next mild dilemma revolved around getting dressed. Was she going to have to ask him to leave the room before she did so, or would he act upon a hint? Did he expect or hope to sit there and watch? She delayed the procedure for as long as she dared, only just pipped to the post by the managerial voice who knocked on the door and explained Aaron O'Brien's unfortunate situation. Eoghan was visibly distressed with the second consecutive intrusion on his free time, but the voice behind the door seemed to carry enough authority for him to pass on complaining and accept instead the responsibility. As he left to sulk his way down to the kitchen, Sheila shunned his concerns for her hunger and boredom, outlining her plans to go searching for artistic inspiration. Things suddenly seemed a little better for her; she would be left to her own devices up until the time she was due to meet with Ama, and then planned to be gone all afternoon. Maybe her absence would give Eoghan sufficient time to rethink his own plans, to cop himself on, and to switch back to the happy funny guy she had – up until extremely recently – been most willing to hook up with every now and then. At the very least, it was something for her to hope for. She jumped quickly from the bed, and reached for the curtains. It was shockingly bright, and evidently very warm outside. She opened a window to let a little air in, and turned towards her clothes. Too warm for the blue T-shirt, that was a given – she wondered about the radiation patches again, and lifted her sleeping shirt to inspect her belly, but found nothing. She pulled open her bag and took an infinitely more acclimatising yellow vest from within. And lamented her decision to not bother bringing lighter trousers of any kind.

Finding that her hangover had subsided sufficiently in time, she decided to spend the remainder of the morning productively, and began snooping around for something to sketch. Anything at all to dirty the fresh pad in her bag that goaded of laziness. The window in Eoghan's room was too small and too awkward to see out of, her view impaired by a potted plant unless she stood on the corner of the bed and leaned across to peer out the open top sash at the hushing sea. Instead, she left the room and walked along the corridor towards the

stairs, hoping for another vantage point because the coast-facing wall suggested potential. She found what she was looking for – and what she thought she could remember from the night before – at the far end of the corridor, at the top of the stairs. A small open lounging area, consisting of an inviting blue armchair, a small coffee table, and a large sunken window embedded deep into the wall at elbow height for those who chose to sit in the chair. Sheila eased herself guiltily into the soft cushions, quickly looking around for any other *real* guests who may have been approaching from the stairs or from the corridor to take advantage of the setting. She rested her drawing pad on her knees and gazed out the bright clean window. It was a glorious sight. From the three-storey height, she felt as though she could leap successfully from the sill, over the low row of buildings on the opposite side of the road, and onto the baked sand of the beach. The sun was burning so fiercely it seemed to be rotating at speed, sending great shiny transparent asteroids onto the rippling surface of the sea where they bounced and leapt, all the time keeping diligent tabs on their secondary occupation - heating the waters. The window itself gave the impression that it had been included as some kind of a hasty afterthought, a large single pane of glass fitted into a smooth opening in the wall. No divisions, no panels to swing inwards or outwards, no means to add sound or breaths of air to the act. She moved her head from left to right, trying to give herself a good panoramic from which to work. The strand was remarkably straight, continuing along its loose tightrope line for some distance, disappearing behind a wash of green away on her right, the forest that she had walked past on her approach, and probably the same forest through which she would walk a little later on. A distant headland butted out into sea further down the coast, a purple and grey bruise in the hazy distal light. There was a similar protrusion on her left, slightly nearer, promenading out into the turquoise aqua spill. It dawned on her that she was looking out upon a huge sleepy bay, unusual in its lay in that it gave the impression that it did not curve, but instead aligned itself to straight lines, with the side arms of the giant harbour meeting perpendicularly with the mainland, a godly square of water complimented by land. It suggested to her a strange comparison with a Lego piece from her youth, a small plastic rectangular sliver with two long circular protuberances at either end. She flipped open the lid of her pad and began drawing, first sketching a brick-sized version of her Lego piece, and then slashing in gentle waves with her pencil to transform it into the seascape from her window.

She was happy with the final finished image, and decided against penning a rough colour scheme to accompany it, preferring to work eventually to her own degrees of shading, and the colours from memory. She glanced at her

watch, it was now making for 1pm. She had an hour before going to meet with Ama. Despite her testy dismissal of Eoghan earlier, her stomach was giving disgusting rumbles to remind her that she hadn't eaten. There were some stupid rules in place about using the hotel's crummy restaurant, she couldn't remember the specifics, but knew that it had necessitated her popping out from the bar the night before to dine at the takeaway hatch somewhere along the street. She vowed to spend a little extra time in the gym as soon as she got home, to burn off all the extra fast food she would be sinning with that weekend, and dropped her drawing materials back in the room before setting off down the two flights of stairs. She instantly regretted not donning any sun cream just as soon as the midday rays hit her face, and made a note of preparing properly for her afternoon excursion once she got back to the hotel. It was ferociously warm, with little or no digestable air. The locals seemed reluctant to move around in the heat, and she counted five separate pockets of conversation, people taking every opportunity to stop and talk and stagger their journeys. The car park at the beach entrance was already crammed with station wagons and smaller two-people cars. The probable sounds of children squealing as dipped toes were bitten by the deceptively cool tide carried through on a fairy's breath breeze, tickled by tall and wild grass on the minor dunes. And then the stupid takeaway hatch was closed. She stood aghast, trickles of sweat itching her shoulders and back, asking nobody in particular just what she was supposed to do for lunch. A middle-aged guy in stripy swimming shorts bowled out of the shop two doors down from her disgruntled position, slurping theatrically from an ice-cream by means of an answer. Sheila moved reluctantly towards the shop, refusing to acknowledge the meek voice inside that proposed to her that perhaps it was too warm for hot food anyway. Inside the fan-blown store, she picked out a packet of plain crisps, a Mars bar, a bottle of still water and a chunky ice-cream sandwich. It would be enough to keep her going until she returned from scoping out the scene at the American's clifftop. Although at that point in time, as she stepped back into the bright sunny furnace, nibbling thoughtfully on her slowly melting ice-cream, she felt like baling on the proposed journey. The dark olive forest at the end of the ungainly coast road looked suspiciously far away. The tar on the blacktop, like everything else around it, was suffering; bubbles of black heat, giving the impression that it was floundering in puddles of wetness underneath. She wondered how she was going to make it out that far, and beyond. It was so far away. And so hot.

Having finished her slipshod lunch and ambled back to the room to smear herself with gorgeously-perfumed sun cream, Sheila found herself idling in the hotel reception area, waiting for Ama with twenty minutes to spare. As it was,

her newfound friend was herself ten minutes early, strolling into the lobby to check and see if the artist girl had showed up before their arranged time. Sheila lifted herself from the couch on which she was perched, not wanting to seem as lethargic as she felt.

“Hi. You’re early?”

So was she, but that was beside the point. She hadn’t been shackled by work duties. Ama grinned with an infuriating quality that did not identify itself.

“So are you. No, I’m finished early, not that many guests eating today. Too hot for it, I guess”.

And while those around her in the sleepy village were displaying the cruel mocking side-effects of the weather – dark-stained ampits, fiery cheeks and dribbling foreheads, Ama looked completely at ease, no visible signs of struggle or any intrusion on her cool exterior. Sheila was jealous, again.

“Yeah, it is warm”.

“Are you ready to go?”

She was nodding her eyes towards the bag hanging from Sheila’s shoulder.

“Sure. Did you not want to get changed?”

She would have assumed that the loosely serious attire of a waitress was far from requisite clothing when it came to forestland treks. Ghostly white shirt, buttoned to her neck, unforgivingly heavy black skirt, and at the bottom of it all, surprisingly, black runners. Ama was tugging at her shirt, scraping at a small red stain on a lapel.

“Nah, these’ll be ok”.

“How do you get away with those?”

“My runners?”

“Yeah”.

“Well, they don’t really look like runners. As long as they’re respectable, they don’t mind”.

The same confusing, dizzying mist clouded Sheila’s brain. She felt more lazy than ever before, and suddenly faint. But the other girl in the empty lobby was making gentle movements towards the door, seemingly suggesting that they get their little nature hike underway. She wondered quickly how and why Ama had agreed to be her tour guide. She blushed instantly while wondering how she had ever had the nerve to ask such a ridiculous favour of a relative stranger. She wondered if Ama was in any way suspicious of her, and if that was her reasoning for wanting to get the trip across the clifftop over and done with. But then again, she could have had no reason to be suspicious of Sheila in any way. She had no hidden or ulterior motive. All she wanted was a tiny bit of extra

company; maybe she was a little nervous about approaching the friendly American writer on her own – what was wrong with that? Regardless, she followed Ama towards the door, and back out into the sweltering afternoon heat. The conversing couples had abandoned their outdoor pursuits, and all scuttled back into the shade. Ama stood waiting for Sheila to catch her up, to allow them both to walk side by side. Maybe she wasn't suspicious. Maybe she didn't really mind doing her this favour. As the two girls eased themselves into another round of simple effortless conversation, Sheila breathed a well-disguised sigh of relief. It had been the briefest of fits of panic for nothing.

They got as far as the turn-off beside the shop on the corner before Ama started making noises about perhaps having been a little hasty in deciding not to change her clothes. She apologetically offered to run on ahead, claiming that she would take a shortcut, run home and make her way back down to meet again at Dargan's Corner, directly across from the forest, if Sheila herself wanted to continue walking straight along the strand road. Sheila replied that it wasn't necessary for her to run, especially in that heat, and that the delay wouldn't bother her. She accepted Ama's subsequent offer to go with her to her home, and climbed the timidly-sloping incline for about fifty yards before veering off down a tight alley-way between concrete-walled back gardens, coming out into a blazingly yellow field, overgrown but not unruly. They crossed the field, and another narrow road, and moved on across a recently-mown embankment, which was hemmed in at both ends by hump-backed bridges. Sheila's curiosity got the better of her, asked and was told that they were currently walking along a disused railway line. She then remembered the view from the bridge as she had first walked into the village, and retrieved her bearings. They climbed up onto the opposite end of the hollow, through a gate in the wall of one of the gardens that looked out on the green trench, and to the back door of Ama's home. Inside, she introduced Sheila to her mother, a woman in her forties who was blatantly responsible for her daughter's bohemian tones. She had a much stronger splash of her homeland in her accent, and listened attentively to their plans for the afternoon. As Ama changed from her working clothes into a sky UCLA athletics T-shirt and faded tan jeans, her mother filled Sheila with cheap lemonade and pleasant words about the weather. The Irish girl was a little disappointed at being pulled away from the woman's voice, and secretly hoped for some reason to have to call back in on the return journey from Arlton Hall.

The soft wind that climbed up over the rocks at the end of Dargan's Lane and found its way into their faces was anything but a relief from the heat. It

was warm, salty and seemed to snigger at its own claustrophobic powers. Sheila found it hard to breathe in its grasp, but yet again the girl beside her had no such difficulty. She was speaking of her own college hopes and aspirations, how she regretted having wasted a year in transition year at school, and how she was masochistically looking forward to challenging herself with the Leaving Cert exams in 12 months time. Sheila offered to take whatever contact details she could from the slightly younger girl with a view to churning some insider information on the CAD-related course in WIT from her old flatmate Aibhinn and passing it on. Ama's grateful response was interrupted by the appearance of a small inquisitive boy, who levered himself from the wall of the last house on the lane in good time to fall in step with the two girls.

"Where you goin', Ama?"

His green eyes remained shyly but inquisitively on Sheila, the stranger.  
"I'm going into the woods, Darren".

She spoke with the protracted patience of a warrior who'd fought and won a thousand similar battles. Sheila was amused.

"Why?"

"To check on the picnic".

There was a flash of awed recognition on the grubby face. More so than on Sheila's.

"The teddy bear's picnic?"

Ama turned to smile wickedly at Sheila. It made a little more sense.

"Yes".

Darren altered his tone to reprimand. They were as three crossing the silent road carefully, making for the gaping black hole in the trees. It was dark in there.

"That's bold. You're not 'posed to".

"Because they'll eat me?"

He stopped to think for a second. Ama stopped walking and stood in the cool shade of the glowering trees. Sheila peered ahead into the impending darkness, as did Darren. He shifted his feet uneasily.

"I don't know. Not 'posed to".

"Well, I'll be ok. I'm not going alone, I have Sheila with me, and she's a trained government agent, isn't that right?"

Sheila was equally as confused as the young kid, and looked back to see the same malevolent grin. It was probably easier to just go blindly with the flow of the evil confuser's mouth.

"Yes I am", she whispered, a little pathetically.

Darren's frown deepened as the other two turned their bodies slowly and moved towards the forest.

"Don't know what that is".

Ama spoke without turning back towards him.

"Go home, Darren. You know you're not allowed in here".

Sheila looked back at the forlorn silhouette, stifling a giggle as Ama wretchedly assured the watching boy.

"Don't worry, we'll look after the teddy bears".

They swept through the pleasantly refrigerated woods, feet slushing through occasional animal-gathered mounds of leaves and twigs. Ama wrote off her dismissal of the pudgy young Darren, affirming that he was usually a pest of the worst possible kind, and had only seemed a little meek and quiet because there had been a stranger present. It was a good fifteen minute walk to the other side of the forest, along a path which wound itself needlessly from time to time in contorted patterns, when a straight access route would have sufficed. The light alternated between shards of smoky brightness, and the sheltered wooden darkness of the trees. And then the opening ahead that had hinted at whiteness blurred into view; an arched gap that was roofed by trees clawing at each other overhead. There was a reddish brown horizon in the gap, colours that would eventually blend into being the walls and upper storey of Arlton Hall. As they left behind the shade of the woods, it took a few seconds before the sun could retain its grip on their skin, such was the cool lotion of the trees behind them. It was almost comically bright in comparison, and both were forced to supplement their eyes with heavy squints and hand-made visors. The three visible windows on the entrance-facing wall spat glints of sunshine back at the procrastinating ball of fire, which hovered and burned behind them over the tips of the tallest trees. The unusually wide gates that hung from the red brick walls were closed, and resonated a cold mood of easy hostility. Sheila cut off from laughing absent-mindedly at a roguish comment Ama had made about badgers. Apart from the mad-millionaire-isolation vibe that the frowning gates suggested, there was something else puzzling her. There wasn't any kind of drive-way or road approaching the entrance besides the rough gravel-based path on which they now stepped. Why the need for such magnificently spanning gates if there was no means by which a car or van could query them? She looked to her left, and then to her right. On one side, a grassy wild lawn making its way innocently towards the edge of the cliff, which probably gave way rockily to the washy-sounding sea somewhere below. On the other side, more green, running up to the long red wall of the Hall, and to a bank of trees running parallel to the wall, and another row of

tightly packed trees joining them both at the far end, creating an admirably angular grass arena. From the lie of the shadows at the opposite end, she suspected that the wall of the estate stopped short of touching with the perimeter trees, and that there was a gap, possibly one through which motored vehicles could pass. Although there were no tearaway tyre-marks on the grass around her, no signs of the dominant iron entrance being used as anything other than a pedestrian route. Ama was passing comment about some aspect of the terrain around them, and Sheila waited patiently for a window of opportunity.

“How come there’s no road leading up to the gates?”

Ama seemed a little irritated at having her conversation focused elsewhere. Sheila wondered why she hadn’t been paying attention to what Ama was saying, and if it had been important enough to warrant the tiniest petulance.

“Look behind you. How’s a car supposed to get through there? What’s it gonna do, jump over the trees? Climb over the cliff?”

Unnecessarily sarcastic, thought Sheila, feeling the finest-hair tickle of hurt in her chest, even though Ama was clearly only joking. She was the tourist, she was allowed to ask questions. She hurriedly continued her line, not wanting to seem deflated.

“So there’s no way for cars to get through?”

“Of course there is. There’s a small private road that runs through the woods to the main road. It meets up with the back of the house”.

It sounded ridiculous.

“So you mean there’s no way to get to the front of the house by car?”

Ama shook her head slowly, eyes shut.

“Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know, you’d have to ask them. Maybe the owners built the place, planned to clear a road through the forest at the front, but never bothered”.

It still didn’t explain why they decided instead to clear a road to the back of the estate, but Sheila accepted that Ama was probably getting quickly bored with her queries. So instead she made a kind of wonder-agreement sound. They had by now reached the gates, and noticed the grey and black intercom box on the side of the right-hand pillar. Ama threw her hand towards it, a smirk of mock exasperation on her face. Sheila had for some minutes now been tracking the change in the personality of the local girl; from sleek, unflapped statuette of firm manners and decency, to the biting witty and playful stranger. She was eventually uneasy with the gradual change, and decided that she liked the old mysterious girl better. The one who seemed to hide her own confidence and assured bravado a little more successfully than her present incarnation. Because

she was doing Sheila this favour, did she feel as though it gave her the right to be so *bizarre*?

“Come on, ring the bloody thing. I haven’t got all day, you know”.

To any ears other than Sheila’s own, the words, the phrasing and the tone would have been marked as joking. But standing in the presence of the foreboding gates, her hand warmed by the dull heat of the sunbathing intercom, she began to fret once more. That maybe she was annoying the local girl with her venture. That maybe there was a reason behind her own itching discomfort.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was only by chance that Malik was making his way back along the scarlet western corridor, returning to his studio after – amongst other things - a hugely satisfactory bowel movement. He didn’t remember opening the narrow window nearest the kitchen wing, then again there were a couple of things his mind was a little sketchy about when asked to pertain to the most recent of his days in Dunfarring. He didn’t know how or when he had come up with the riff for his current work-in-progress “Osim”, only knew that it was the wave file open on his machine when he woke that morning. Upon playing it back, his heavy ears had been suitably taken to allow himself to deny his body the food, the drink and the coke it pined for. He wriggled hastily with his bass station and onboard drum machine until he had a reasonable loop worth adding to the swirling effects-laden guitar part. After a sweetly simple breakfast, he played around with some keyboard parts and a dumbed rhythm guitar track. The vocal melody virtually wrote itself, and he began scribbling lines and lyrics excitedly. He had a block of words and images that would fit, pieces that he could chip and pare into being the words to the wordless sounds in his head. He skipped into the huge book-walled study to search quickly for a title, stumbled upon a Greek translation for hate, and as was his new superstition, reversed it to form “Osim”. Then renamed the sequence file on his computer, toggled the volumes and played the whole track back at volume. It was good. Powerful, strapped to an insistent danceable beat, searing through troughs and peaks as his nonsense garbled words held the vocal line in place. He took the guitar from the intro so as it now began with the drum loop before kicking into the song. It sounded even better, and this was even at the most basic of demo stages. He then took his exuberant stone to two birds, one more pressing than the other, taking the pages of potential lyrics into the downstairs bathroom while he shat. It was a doubly productive half hour, and he emerged disposed of his waste and with his words arranged perfectly. His

intention was to lay down a vocal track there and then, and delete the root mumbles he had been working with, but as his working day moved slowly towards evening, he would learn that he was not going to be free to ice his digital cake any further. Instead, as he passed the open passageway window, he heard something that arrested his attention, something that he couldn't recall hearing any other time during his stay at Arlton Hall – voices, swirling faintly inwards from outside.

And of more immediate interest to him, the unmistakable tones of someone laughing; a young, happy female someone.

He jogged past his studio room, and back into the study at the front of the house. A foolish decision, as all views from that room's windows were obscured by either the tired red wall that bordered the stone enclosure, or by the tall porch which stuck itself proudly forward, formal and welcoming, like a permanent mute brick butler. Malik was forced instead to hurry across the hall into the sister front room, which would offer an easier visual on his gate. In truth, as he made his way to the window, his mind was not fixed in wondering or even hoping that it was the tanned waitress who was intruding so gaily on his work. He had nothing in his head that acted as a pointer to the invitation he had recently extended to her and her artist friend. No reason to suspect that it may have been either. He was more broadly compelled to identify the female source of laughter, with no thought or hasty consideration for any subsequent actions on his own part. It could just as easily have been a young mother with her child, or a courting couple, but to his instant reactions, it spoke of an opportunity with as much potential as anything else he'd known since arriving in Ireland. He had not truly enjoyed the company of *anybody* – male or female – in weeks, aside from his brief strained introduction to the village beauty queen and her friend. He was hungry, in a thousand different ways, and aware of the challenges that lay if he expected to eat. New scowling challenges, the kind of which he had not had to consider, possibly ever. He edged his way around a table, and eased himself into the eight-foot-tall window box, peering greedily into the sunshine, veiled behind the lace curtains. If it was something or someone worth making an effort for – as was his breakneck suspicion upon hearing the unidentified female object – he would make an effort. Go after her, slide on the charm that had presented itself so unusually and so easily when needed to work on the waitress and her friend. He wasn't worried about what to say, or how to say it. That would surely come with the efficiency with which it came the last time. His mind throbbed with possibilities – a minor accident in the house which needed seeing to, after which he could reward assistance with a cold drink and then dinner somewhere; maybe he could

follow at pace, do the tourist thing and ask to join their party, and work from there. Whatever, if it was worth pursuing, he would do so. He was more excited by this than by his new pumping jam. Still no visual, and his straining ears caught no more than a muffled symphony. He wouldn't risk opening the window and announcing his voyeurism. His leg muscles itched, asking if they would be needed to carry him out into the sunshine for any purpose. But as the sudden recognition and surprise faded to him remembering his brilliantly disguised groundwork, Malik ebulliently realised that he wouldn't have to move from his stately perch; *she* was coming to him. His heart leaped salmon-like in his chest, equating the old curiosity with the new redefined hopeful possibility. Whichever of the two girls it was that had laughed his attention away from his music was irrelevant. They were both standing waiting at his gate, bringing themselves to him on the wave of his own ingenious deception. That he would have to work equally as hard to increase his own standing with the waitress chick was of no great concern; he had the newfound confidence of something inside that was capable of plotting and planning like an evil genius, putting words and schematics into his mouth. Concocting plans and ways in which to paint himself as some kind of a mysterious stranger in town, one capable to demanding the attentive interest of the natives' star attraction. And then the shorter blurred vision with black hair reached out to the intercom on his gate. A split second later, there was a loud buzzing sound that began somewhere in the depths of the ground floor. It was his first time hearing the electrical bee sing. His response was sluggish, unsure and unfamiliar, but as he ran, he remembered standing impatiently in the kitchen as the dowdy old bat from the renting company had shown him how and where to operate the intercom. In the kitchen.

He was gaggingly out of breath, and paused to force a few deep inhalations to settle himself before punching the response button, and sending a breezy querying "hello" down the line. There was a second's delay before his eager ear heard another click, and the tinny unsure voice at the other end.

"Hi, it's, um, Sheila and Ama. We were talking to you yesterday? About maybe getting some ideas for painting?"

Sheila was wearing her vicious lack of confidence on her voicebox, dropping each sentence off on a high pitch, turning everything into a question, asking him to remember. Malik turned on his good-natured tap. It seemed appropriate.

"Sure, sure. I thought you were going to ring before coming out?"

He said it lightly enough for it to be a jovial reprimand. On the outer side of his gates, Sheila was sucking her lips into her mouth in embarrassment as she turned to catch Ama's eye. Another click, and a distorted static-backed reproach.

"I know, I'm sorry. I lost your number. I can come back again if now is a bad time".

She knew that if she came back another time, she would be doing so alone. She now knew the way, but she would probably miss the confusing but alluring company. Ama's eyebrows were quizzically raised, waiting too for the crackly response.

Malik moved quickly to banish any thoughts of postponement. His laugh was decidedly unnatural to his own ears. Perhaps not to his listeners.

"No, no, that's alright. I'm ready anytime, really. Hold on, I'll open the gates".

He pushed the flat rectangular button marked "Gates", deaf to the mechanical clank which surprised the waiting girls as the great iron railings creaked into movement, swinging gently inwards. They waited until both halves had docked metallicly with the pillars before stepping through and making for the huge wooden door. By this time, Malik had bounded back along the corridor into the high hall and approached the peephole with one open eye. He watched their cautious appraisal of the surroundings, stood back from opening the door until one of them rang the bell. And quickly realised that he hadn't yet heard his bell being rung. He waited expectantly, wondering in a combination of excitement and fear just how he was going to perform. And took a second out from his dizzy apprehension to listen out for the new clanging sound of his doorbell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alicia thought that "Dargan's Lane" rang the best kind of bell, and stopped to pull one of Ama's old letters from a pouch on the front of her rucksack. There, in lazy inky handwriting, was glorious confirmation that she wasn't facing another long and exhausting walk; she was already on the route she was supposed to be on, the block letters on the white metal sign screwed to the small stone wall beside her matching up with the first line of Ama's messy address. With a renewed spring in her step, Alicia counted down the house numbers, identifying Number 9 long before she reached it. She stepped into the porch, still weary but pleasantly surprised that the last leg of her journey had been so short. As the doorbell chimed somewhere away in the house, the scale of what she had just completed slapped her gently across a heated cheek. *Wow.* Cali to this tiny place in Ireland, just like that. She winked without realising it, and then wondered

if Ama still looked like she did in the last photo she'd sent, three years ago. They had never met before, and the magnitude of *that* brushed Alicia's other cheek into a faint rose colour. There was no answer to her first call, so she pushed the bell button again. The same sing-song sound. Seconds passed silently. *Shit*. Why was there no answer? Why wasn't Ama here to welcome her? Had she not read of Alicia's impending visit? A sudden guilty thought – should she have called from Wexford the night before? Or even before leaving that morning? Dammit, why did she have to have chosen the dramatic arrival approach, unannounced and all nerdy surprising?

And then she realised that she didn't have a phone number for Ama, that she couldn't have called ahead, and she felt a little less like beating herself. That in itself presented a new problem – how in the fuck was she supposed to check back to see if Ama ever showed up? It looked like an awful long way down to the end of that lane, and who was to say that the hotel she hoped to stay in was not another distance away? Still, there would be a phone in the hotel, maybe she could call the operator and get a number, she had an address. Then again, Ama had said that she worked at the hotel, so maybe the people there could help her out. Even better, maybe Ama would still be *at* the hotel when she got there. Options and hopes that were better than nothing.

The pint-sized cloud of panic that had threatened to hover over her head passed, and she walked back out onto the lane, and turned to her left, down towards the waiting sea. One screw -up, but it was ok. It was still early, not yet two-thirty. She would get herself sorted out at the hotel, and look a little deeper into finding Ama. And then attend to the *real* agenda of the day. Hell, if she couldn't track down her evasive pen-pal, she'd just get directions from some local to wherever it was that she had to go to track down Malik, it couldn't be that hard. And that was where her time would really begin. Again, she refused to consider the magnitude and the hassle of the return journey that she faced so soon after getting there. If things went to plan, she would not be making her way home quite so quickly. If things went to plan, she would be making a reverse charges call to her Mom, spinning a story that would be as unbelievable as it would be incredible.

If Alicia had bothered to peer around the corner of the house as she passed, she would have seen a blue-smocked woman hanging clothes on a line at the bottom of the garden, unable to hear the doorbell calling from where she stood. And if Alicia had seen her way to joining the humming woman, she would also have seen the two female figures strolling along the sculpted grassy gorge.

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Hall

She would then have been pleased to hear the woman identifying the taller of the two distant girls as her daughter Ama.

## chapter fourteen

Even without the extra two hour weight of having to drive to Rosslare Harbour to pick up the horticultural repair shit from the customs people, it would have been an extremely busy day for Alan at the park. He had been back and forth all morning between his duties as a security guard and as an unwilling volunteer worker, roped into assisting with the remodelling of the small patch of woods devastated by what was now known in employee folklore as the D4 Dumbshit Forest Fire. Thanks to the intervention of Mother Nature and the handful of gardeners who lived nearby, the outbreak was confined to an area the size of a tennis court. Ironic, considering that the careless perpetrators had been a group of five deplorable rich kids kicked out of the Strand Hotel in Dunfarring some hours earlier for trashing their room. One drunk drive later, with the hotel management's promise of police interception ringing in their ears, they swung into a sheltered cranny on the edge of the nature reserve. Abandoned the car and made for the trees, not wanting to be anywhere near the road should the cops have passed by. They settled in the driest clearing they could find, and lit a fire for warmth, one which was picked, whipped and spread by the wind, and eventually tamed by the drizzle. A week later, as the gardeners and the volunteers worked to repair the damage, as one they were fuelled by the suggestions winging back and forth regarding their own breeds of punishment for the five teenage males, who had been traced by a vigilant detective linking the two major incidents in the Dunfarring area that balmy night.

Quickly tiring of the heavy manual labour, Alan opted instead to offer himself as solution to Eric's urgent lunchtime need to have some things collected from the harbour. It meant an hour there and an hour back in the searing dead heat of a borrowed Micra, but it also meant two hours away from lugging charred corpses of trees around. And it also meant returning for the first time in years to the spectacular port setting of his youth. Having noticed something of a lull in his literary skills – writer's block already? – he failed to see how he could not be inspired by the sight of the great harbour beneath him as the main Wexford road fell away to nothing. It was a scene and a reminder he had already catalogued as being one to capture, and he didn't feel like letting the chance to refresh the living postcard pass him by. And as he pulled away from the hazy warm park, he scolded himself disbelievingly for never once thinking to take the bus or train out to the harbour for nostalgic purposes. Instead he wasted his spare weekends in dull beer gardens, or trying to worm his way into the favour of brainless but rich horse-breeders' daughters at various race meetings.

The journey down was hot and uncomfortable, even with his driver's side window rolled to the door. There was the constant stinging stench of child's vomit in the car, an almost ridiculous addition to his trials. To top it all, at the end of the gloriously windy flat approach to the harbour, he was greeted with a sight as ghastly and as unexpected as had the port not been there at all. Whereas ten years before there had been nothing but grey concrete waiting areas and patient truckers, now there was a hideous cancer of red metal and tinted black glass, huge terminals and walkways, gleaming monuments and checkpoint buildings. An unaesthetic regression of progress planted down on the natural beauty of *his* harbour. The giant spread below and around him moved in a hub of antlike fervour, alien and serenely surreal in its business. Even the smoking ferry seemed to be unnecessarily modern, and was that a fucking kiddies playground on the ground? Having never before had to negotiate the road that wound down into the bowels of the port, he was unhappily challenged by having to divide his time efficiently between keeping his eyes on the road's seething traffic and on trying to count the thralls of needless changes beneath. The enormous car parks remained full of new vehicles, but were now framed by soulless grey warehouse buildings, and no longer simple naïve gatherings of sparkling Nissans and Fords on the lip of the headland. They had fucking ruined his special place. It was as commercial and as glitteringly faceless as Vegas, and desperately not the vision he remembered. Unused to the new road scheme, he was clueless, and his minor indecision was ultimately berated by a loud motorist behind him. He still smelled the sick over the industrial perfumes of the ships, and tasted something like retaliatory vomit in his own throat. His distaste was immediate, horrific in its ferocity, and shocking in its necessity. Even with the aid of a particle transporter, he could not have left that unrecognisable unapologetic whore quickly enough.

He conducted his employer's business just as speedily as his disappointed soul and the stupid sleepy customs guy would let him. He sped away back up the hill, gripping the wheel tightly and refusing to look to his right, almost scared. Just as he bent the car around the four-lane corner, he cast his eyes semi-anxiously towards the sea, like a gangster looking back uneasily at the boss he knows he has upset, hoping for a more assured parting on better safer terms, reducing the risk of being shot in the back. But the harbour was offering nothing. No excuses, not ashamed of her new clothes or of what her old friend thought of them. *Write about that*, giggled something inside Alan's head, but he was sufficiently drained of useable emotions to not respond, whether to worry or to convince himself that nothing could damage the old-school slides behind his eyes.

Back at the park, he had only just savagely unloaded the cargo that had been the root of his disgusting discovery when he was landed with another job. To investigate the claims of one fat worried American tourist who swore she'd heard screams and "cracks like gunshots" somewhere in the distance. He hopped back into his own mini-truck and drove off into the forest, muttering about the sanity of the Yank and deciding to take the longest route through Barker's Copse towards the southernmost sprawl of trees, the isolated Woods With No Name. He would make the most of this particular chore. It was making towards quarter past three. If he timed it lethargically enough, he could wring his last few hours out of this exploratory investigation. Arrive back at the jovial huts in time to clock out. Maybe join one or two of the others for a couple in their local before going home, showering and going somewhere to get nicely toasted and try his luck. He needed entertaining, and to get out of himself. He needed to be distracted from the fact that the happy harbour setting from his early teens had sold herself out – without consultation, consideration or warning – into a tacky, buzzing plastic hive. One that could hardly ever serve as a source of inspiration to anybody, anywhere.

The bottom forest was without an official name, and sometimes referred to as The Edge, due to its lie on the very perimeter of the reserve, and also because Eric was a fan of late 70's U2. It wasn't considered out of bounds to the public, but was too far off any of the designated paths and walks for the majority of visitors to bother with. Besides, there wasn't much to see – once they'd seen one tree, they'd seen them all, figured Alan. The small river kept comprehensively to itself away on the western side, selfishly commanding the presence of the ridges, the waterfall and the rest of the best of the natural attractions in the park. Alan couldn't recall ever hearing of anybody bothering to wander the considerable extra distance southwards, but it was from here that the interfering middle-aged bag had insisted she'd heard the noises, so it was to here that he headed.

Usually, he would have been loathe to abandon the old man coughs of the small green truck in favour of walking, but even by barely squeezing the accelerator, he had made it to the edge of his destination in an upsettingly quick sub-half-hour time. Besides, he had had enough of borderline travel sickness for one day, and the bumpy path that tittered away into the brooding shade seemed infinitely more comfortable on foot. He squinted ahead, and his eyes were instantly drawn to a flash of bright colour that blinked at him through the fading brown light inside. Bright red. *Blood? Gunshots? Screams?* His disinterested heart climbed out from the mournful well of whatever it was wallowing in, and shook itself dry. Alan swallowed hastily, feeling something stick in his throat, and

his ears dilating to record anything in the silence. Jesus, the old bat hadn't been imagining things; here was *vivid* testimony. His eyes raced furtively through the undergrowth at the base of the tainted oak, no body and no other trace besides the jagged oval smear of crimson. He had already stepped through into the property of the trees, and was peering past the splash of red on the trunk not fifty yards from him. It was disturbingly cool in there. Behind him, the thinnest branches waved in an equally thin breeze, seemingly beckoning him back towards the sunny entrance, luring him in their harmless innocence. *Backup*, he decided. He was not going any further without company. He edged back out of the shadows, keeping his eyes on a non-specified point beyond the red stain. And then he was halted by the tickling trees, and the realisation that he had forgotten to lift one of the park issue walkie talkies from the rack in the main hut. He was going to have to drive back, and request backup manually. His mind raced beside his pulse and his breath, a marathon of anxiety. *The woman said she heard gunshots and screams, and I saw blood.* It was enough for him. He wasn't Chuck fucking Norris, he was not going into unfamiliar woodlands unarmed looking for somebody with a gun. He woke the reluctant old truck from its slumber, and sped off back along the eastern utility dirt track. This time, pressing his foot down as hard as it would go on the stiff accelerator pedal.

An hour later, he was feeling hotter than ever before, and more embarrassed than even the occasion at his Debs when he had been roundly debugged on the dancefloor by his "friends". Three men had joined the investigation, and the police were on their way as a precaution, and not even Eric's confirmation that he had done the right thing could deflect from the streaming eyes of his work comrades who were in very real danger of soiling themselves through laughter. The ensuing jokes were topical but bad, but Alan had not it in him that late afternoon to rise above his discomfort and to join in laughing at his over-reaction. A pathetic smile was all he could muster over his sticky apathetic misery. Eric tired very quickly of his employees' amusement, and snapped that having some fucker running around their park spraying paint was no laughing matter, and that they were to comb the perimeter woods until they found the prick responsible and brought him to heel. As he pattered away bad-temperedly on his gleaming new cart, the mood of the jesters turned quickly sour as their relaxed last few hours of sitting around evaporated into a needless game of hide and seek with some idiot playing with paint. Although he was no less perturbed by the ensuing task, Alan allowed himself a small smirk of revenge, wishing he had the balls to point out that they were no longer laughing themselves stupid at his honest mistake.

They came across the stricken man shortly after, lying awkwardly behind a fallen tree, too worn out to offer anything more than the nonsensical mumbles that had alerted the three wardens to his existence. He was flanked by a rosily-cheeked man in matching overalls, both flecked with bright paint, both flushed by whatever had gone on before. The second man closed his eyes feebly in relief, and whispered some kind of reassurance to the injured party. Pajo drew immediate and unnecessary attention to the two discarded weapons, and Alan felt a little better through being wise enough to step forward and demonstrate them as fun guns. Pajo's indignance reeled itself into boorish authority.

"So what the fuck is going on here, boys? Spraying fucking paint around the park, is it?"

The second paint-guy stood up with a weary intelligence smeared across his face, pointing anxiously to the man who hadn't yet moved.

"Look, this man here is in severe pain, he has broken his ankle. We need to get him to a hospital quickly".

And while the other two reacted to the situation slowly and accordingly, there was enough bitterness left in Pajo to allow him to continue his retarded line of blame.

"Serves him fucking right. Who gave you permission to run around tearing this place up?"

Stephen smiled weakly but appreciatively at the two men who were stooping to lean carefully over the jaded Kevin. He himself was too tired to ball his fist in response to the anger that was building. He didn't even look at the frothing redneck as he answered him.

"Look, we'll sort all that out in time. Can we just get this man some help?"

The frothing redneck spat something under his breath, but Stephen had diverted his attention efficiently to the sensible enquiries being made by the other two wardens. In time, they had managed to lift Kevin into a carrying position, catching his injured leg under the knee, supporting it sufficiently to prevent it from dangling as they stepped through the undergrowth. Pajo was conspicuous in his reluctance to pitch in and help, but he was not needed.

On the way back to the main warden holdings, Stephen filled Alan in on the remaining details of the afternoon's events. His own fatigue was sufficient to render untraceable any of the mature discomfort that should have surfaced as he told the grim-faced authority figure about his grown colleagues' childish pursuits. Kevin, draped over old padded compost sacks in the back of the small truck, had

been sedated by the length of time he'd been in pain. Alan knew enough about anatomy to know that the man's ankle was in a bad way, hugely swollen and spectacularly discoloured in a storm of purple and black. He learned that the other two members of the paintballing crew had been sent off back down the moor towards the N74, to their waiting car, instructed to go and get help. Back at the base, having called out an ambulance to attend to Kevin, he checked in with the emergency services, to see if the other two men had managed to raise an alarm which would now need to be cancelled. No alarm, answered the lady who glanced through the clockings, only one call that day in the Dunfarring area, nothing to do with the park or injured paintballers. Alan was puzzled by this, and voiced his surprise to Stephen, who agreed that Derek and Aidan should have reached the car and a phone in the intermittent time. As the ambulance drove off, having passed on the opportunity to travel with Kevin, Stephen made quiet noises about getting back to the hotel, reaching the other two and letting them know what had happened. He had the address of the hospital in Wexford, and had provided the ambulancemen with his own mobile number, and the guarantee that he would follow them to take care of all extra details just as soon as he located his comrades and their car. Alan offered to run the lone paintballer back into the village, to his hotel and his friends. He felt a little sorry for the remaining invader, and the drained way in which he carried himself and attended methodically to the needs of his fallen friend. It was only a few splashes of paint, it could easily be washed off, and in the light of the developed circumstance, it did not deserve the continued disgusted derision of Alan's own imbecile workmate. Stephen gratefully accepted the offer of a lift in the jeep, and he was equally as happy to leave the awkwardness of the peace-shattered nature reserve behind him as they bundled out onto a small country lane, linking in minutes with the main road below.

Alan asked needless questions along the way, preferring to keep the admirably focused stranger talking and the mood as light as possible rather than silent and pensive. He could tell that the distress of the hospital-bound twenty-something had rubbed itself into Stephen's own bearing. He conceded that perhaps their original social plans had been well and truly scuppered, but changed his tack quickly to laughingly suggest that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to round up the other two members of his team, go collect the mended fourth man, and return to embark on a session to flush their minds of the forgettable afternoon's games. It was easy to laugh, because he was tossing a New Model Army lyric around inside his head, something about young money men and paintball games. He couldn't remember the song, or little more than the isolated line and its melody, but it seemed to sneer cruelly and suggest that the

injury of which they now spoke was some kind of undeserved and crudely universal retribution for such immature behaviour. They rounded a deep curving bend, and caught the distant sea peeking up over a hazy horizon. Stephen's eyes had fallen on something else, and his tone adopted a worn-out skin of perplexed wonder.

"Jesus, there's the car".

There was a dash of bright silver ahead, towered over and around by dark green. Alan pressed down on the brakes gently, gauging himself to stop in line with the hood of what pixelled into being a yearling Civic. No-one in it or around it. Stephen fumbled firstly with his seatbelt, and then with the unfamiliar door handle.

"Are you sure?"

He didn't hear an answer as his passenger climbed back out into the sunshine, moving to peer in the windows, one hand to his eyes. Alan disentangled himself, and joined him.

"This is the car you all arrived in?"

"Yes".

Stephen turned back to glance at Alan quickly before looking up and down the road, and scanning the moors on the opposite side.

"Don't tell me something happened to them as well".

He sounded more irritated than concerned. Alan felt a little useless, and a little left out.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know".

It was careering towards becoming the nightmarish weekend of shit times he had projected it being right at the outset. Alan suddenly felt like walking away there and then. One cock-up after another, how deep did it go?

"Look, maybe they're back at the hotel".

"Why would they leave the car?"

"Did they have the keys?"

"Yes".

"Are you sure".

"I'm sure".

Alan paused for reason. His temples throbbed through heat and the unnecessary complexity of the situation he now found himself in. He couldn't leave without helping. He was seemingly already too attached.

"Let's trace this. They went off through the woods, down the moors towards the car?"

"Yes".

"What exactly did you tell them".

Stephen sighed in remembering.

"I told them to walk towards the edge of the forest, down the moors to the road, and turn right".

"You're sure you said right?"

"Yes".

"What if they turned left?"

"They're not idiots".

*No, because idiots don't fuck their ankles up pretending to be Stormin' Norman Schwarzkoff with paint in a forest,* thought Alan, annoyed by the terse response.

"What if they came out beyond the car?"

"What?"

"What if they came out on the road beyond the car, and then turned right?"

"I don't get you".

"If they turned right then, they'd be getting further away from the car".

"Why would they come out beyond the car?"

Alan shrugged.

"It's easy to lose your bearings in there. A lot of forest, all looks the same".

Stephen took a brief moment to consider it.

"No, we would have passed them".

"Not if they'd gone on beyond the turn-off for the park. Or turned off to the left".

"They wouldn't walk that far. What turn-off to the left?"

"Private road. Leads to the hall. Arlton Hall".

No trace of recognition on Stephen's face, but then again, he wasn't from the area.

"What's that?"

"Just a big old house".

"A ruin?"

"No, no, it's lived in. Some of the time. Why?"

"So it would have a phone?"

"Sure".

"Is it signposted?"

"Yes".

"Then maybe they're there".

“What?”

“If they came out beyond the car, they weren’t on the road, because we didn’t pass them. They wouldn’t have walked past the turn-off for the park because we didn’t pass it on the way out. If they had turned left, they would have eventually found out that they’d taken a wrong turn, and walked back towards the car”.

He paused to inhale, slapping each point off with a new finger on his palm. His face spoke of sincerity. Alan couldn’t find it in him to argue or find fault.

“If something happened to them in the woods or on the moor, one of them would have come back to where we were”.

*Assuming they didn’t get lost*, whispered Alan internally, but wise enough to not bother the man on his roll. He had never seen, met or even properly heard of the missing two men, but sensed nothing more than a pair of neanderthals in their shoes.

“My gut feeling is that they did turn right too far up the road, came to the signpost for this house, and went for that”.

“Why would they abandon the car?”

Stephen flapped his hands in annoyance.

“Maybe they thought it was stolen or something. If they did turn around and come back this way, why didn’t they find it?”

“They could have lost the keys”.

“No. They gave up on the car, saw the signpost for the house, realised there’d be a phone, and made for it. I’m telling you”.

For some reason, using theories and proofs that were floating past his own eyes, Alan accepted that Stephen had made his mind up. It no longer mattered so much to him, his interest in the dilemma had been soaked up gradually by the spongy heat. He just wanted to wash his sweaty hands clean of the accident-prone paintballing fools. And the deductions of the freshly hyperactive blue-and-red splattered thinker before him had presented an honourable escape hatch.

“Right, well if that’s what you think, I can give you a lift back to the Hall, it’s on my way, but after that I have to get this thing back to the park”.

“Great, thanks, I appreciate it”.

He didn’t look like it. Or sound like he meant it.

“Even if they’re not there, you can probably use the phone, check their mobiles or the hotel. And it’s a shorter walk back into the village”.

The longest shots of hope he'd offered anyone in a long time, but in his sweat-cleansing war, all was fair. They were both moving back towards the jeep anyway.

"Thanks. I'm sorry to be such a fucking nuisance. I'll be ok now".

"No big deal", lied Alan. Although it was only something of a white lie at this stage, at what he read as being the curtain close of the drama.

**chapter fifteen**

He stood to one side, limping his wrist back on itself to flourish his hand regally down the corridor by means of direction. The two girls walked past him into the hall, stopping to allow him time to shut the door and turn to usher them towards wherever it was they were to be ushered to. Malik attempted to breathe in the faint fumes of both visitors, smelling above his own dusty nostrils a flowery palate that could have been scent, deodorant or detergent. As he eased the solid wooden door back into its frame and swivelled to smile again at his waiting guests, he balked at a momentary lapse of uncertainty. *Shit, what do I do with them?* And while he blankly considered his options, his detached external shoed them down the main passageway, past the forks for the drawing rooms and his studio. They were making for the kitchen. Perfect. With its high glass windows looking out on the granite and grass sculpturing, and its easy access to the gardens, it was as good a place as any to ease into his tasks. The first of which was to go along with the original artist inspiration shenanigans. Malik's hopeful founded confidence in his new socially gifted automated freeware – regardless of where, how or why it had come about – had not been misplaced. All he needed now was to boost his true real-time trust in the controlling mechanism, to eliminate any needless mild bouts of worry or doubt. There shouldn't have been any reason for him to fret over how he would handle developments or outcomes, to have the good glorious hands that moulded his words and actions question his faith in them. Without them, it would be a much more difficult game to play.

He had noticed the prolonged interest of both girls in his rough studio room as they passed it, and bit his lip in the name of anxiety. There was a little writer/musician lie in place. One that would have to be taken back, at the risk of losing face? How would his inner self handle that? In the wide bright kitchen, Sheila made straight for the far glazed wall, gazing out into the lush watered confines of the reasonably spacious walled garden. It seemed to have been built on two levels, a balcony of concrete patios and small plain fountains, overlooking a long striped lawn which buckled into cluttered clumps of flower beds and bushes, eventually swallowed up by the lording trees of the forest that hugged the compound on three sides, towering stiffly and importantly over the dark red brick of the bottom wall. There was a smaller gate in the far corner, closing off a tight road through the woods. The ocean was just about visible over the wall to the east, which housed a flimsy-looking green door about halfway down. Why would there be a door opening out on to the cliff, wondered Sheila to herself. If allowed, she would inspect it. She felt something along the lines of professional curiosity,

and wanted to check out a couple of angles for her sketches and photos. One of the garden would be cool, maybe one from the bottom looking towards the house. If she could get out through either the door or the gate, there might be another option or two. She was briefly touched by a smiling surprise, and asked silently how she had never felt this kind of high resolution interest in her work before. Then concluded firmly that she had not partaken of enough field trips over the past year – either mandatory and organised or self-motivated – sufficient to stoke in her this amusing fire of artistic view. The domino effect was instant and comical – more trips, more interest in her work, more marks, less need to tidy up her portfolio, and no need whatsoever to be in that kitchen in that house with those people at that time. Favourable or not, she couldn't decide.

“So where exactly do you write?”

She interrupted Malik's careful consideration of how exactly to word his introductory appraisal of the paintable surroundings. He took the question in, filtered the pseudo-mocking innocence, and read Ama as having set something of a trap for him. His formed suspicion had been that she was no bimbo, that she was as dangerous internally as she was on the outside. And here he now squirmed in the proof.

“Uh, you passed it on the way here. The music room”.

Sheila turned away from the banks of glass to double his audience. Not offering him any kind of distractive alternative. It wasn't so much a knife in his side that was being twisted, but more a playful plastic straw. With perhaps the suggestion of attachment to a canister of arsenic.

“Music room?”

“Yes. I'm kinda concentrating on music right now”.

“Really?”

“Yeah”.

He wanted to heed the shoulder-voice that suggested he offered them a drink, or something. But her beady eyes were locked on his, neither warm nor cold, a strange kind of smart retention glowing in them, as though she were offering him the rope and daring him to not hang himself. He couldn't be sure, but thought that he felt something inside him caving, lying down in the face of such unmountable opposition. He was however painfully sure of his own conscious desire to run hotly from the kitchen, abandoning all hope and intention as the cause presented itself as being lost. But there were words greasing their way into his mouth, words he didn't hear coming, words he wanted to trust. His face muscles pulled themselves accordingly into an expression he did not recognise, and he inhaled to prepare himself for an automatic speech for the people.

“The whole writer thing was a bit of a front. I’m actually a musician. I write music, that’s why I’m here. I am also a writer, but that’s not the point. I’m sorry for lying to you like that, but I can’t risk anybody finding me here”.

It sounded good, it sounded authentic, and better still, it sounded a whole lot nearer the truth. Interest settled as a film of fine imperfections on the girls’ faces. He wasn’t done yet, but he had somehow wriggled his flesh free of the hook in his back. *Thank you*, he sighed invisibly, fingering the wound.

“I told you he was a musician”.

Ama had turned in a triumphant crow to Sheila, who smiled semi-nervously. Fuel to Malik’s fire that suspected they were not close friends at all. He returned his eyes to the casually-clothed waitress.

“How did you know I was a musician?”

Her eyes narrowed in a friendly accusatory manner.

“My Dad met you”.

“Your Dad?”

He was not as surprised as his reflex reply would have had a listener believe. After all, he had seen her on the street with the guy from the bar whose face he couldn’t remember. But the milligram of apoplepsy seemed to fit well with the growing light mood of his inquisition. Besides, *he* hadn’t ordered it, his guiding hand had, efficiently filling out an application without any consideration for confusing his ward.

“Yeah. You were talking to him in Duggan’s. Before...you were thrown out”.

He didn’t read a reprimand in the hypnotic eyes. But rather a gentle invitation to tell his side of the story. His mind raced through the slippery details at speed. Could he twist and knot them to be believable yet faultless? His lips curled into a smiling position, a boy sheepish in front of his mother, knowing he could trick and worm his way out of trouble.

“I was drunk”.

“It happens to us all”.

Appraisal of the fact that he should not be chastised for drunken foolishness? A swift and painless retrieval of the floor after the awkwardness of having to admit to lying to her? A curving grin on her tanned face, no longer suggesting ambiguity to challenge him as she stood in her casuals in his kitchen hideaway? It was getting so much *better*. He was performing on all fronts. His heart and his chest thundered more powerfully than the fastest of Draim’s kick drum patterns, beating apprehensively with the first true bout of excitement in fuck knows how long.

“Can I get you guys a drink or something? A soda, water, vodka?”

Again, it seemed to him that Sheila was reluctant to make any kind of decision without first checking with Ama. Sheila herself was watching closely as Ama continued with the same kind of weird confidence, treating the strange American musician-writer with the soul-itching loose ease that had gnawed its way to nag inside Sheila’s own head. Ama swung her head to raise eyebrows, asking if she could answer for them both.

“I’ll have a vodka, please”.

“Sure! And how about you?”

His mouth was asking Sheila, but his mind was wondering worryingly if he had sounded a little too elated by the suggestion that maybe the two girls were willing to party. It could have been worse; had he simply squirted out the words inside his head without censoring them, his guests would surely have been unsettled by the whooping. The black-haired one interrupted his introspection to align herself with the drinks request process, and Malik quickly busied himself in cupboards and the pantry, looking for something to mix with the liquor, figuring that neither of his visitors would drink it as straight as he did. He found a plastic bottle of some kind of dilutable orange squash, and tipped a dash into each of three glass tumblers before leaving the orange on the counter – in case he had grossly miscalculated his measures – and topping the glasses up with vodka from one of the cool bottles in his refrigerator. He offered ice but was told that the chilled contents would suffice. To him, the first mouthful of clumsily mixed drink was repulsive, dry and chemically, grasping hold of the back of his throat as he swallowed, but the girls’ showed no such ill taste. Again, he was struck by a micron of indecision, asking what he was going to say or do next, but it passed as quickly as it had risen, stamped down by the cautious certainty that it was somehow under control.

“So what’s your band called?”

It was a reasonable progression from learning that he was indeed a musician. And the more she kept asking questions, the less space he had to fill. There was still a slight palpable feeling of discomfort in the triangle between them, and Malik held his own glass a little too tightly to his chest for comfort. His face felt rubbery. He was gaggling for another fix.

“Uh, Sin Sister”.

Just before his attention was snatched away by the statement of recognition that Sheila let slip, he had time to catch the blankness on Ama’s face. Nothing. No flicker or trace. So he would not be playing the rock hero, as he had

suspected. No big deal. Instead, it seemed that the persistently interrupting artist had something of note to offer.

“No way. I’ve heard of you guys. Didn’t someone die?”

The badly-worded question forced him to smile. And then the sudden looks of concern from both corners edged him to stifle it, and bring the grimness on. In time, he hoped.

“Um, yeah. Two guys killed themselves”.

*One, two, pause for dramatic effect. Look blankly and emotionally over the tops of their heads into the sunlit colours of the garden.* He then lowered his eyes stealthily, catching Ama’s own on the way back down. It may well have been a slight concerned attention flickering in the dark honey lamps, but he had no way of being sure. A little sympathy wasn’t going to hurt his cause, now was it? He took what he projected to be a steadying lip of vodka from his glass, and wore his best brave face.

“That’s why I’m here. Just getting away from it all”.

Sheila allowed the gravity of the moment room to breathe before offering a meaningless condolence. He acknowledged it, and in turn lightened the mood with a small ensuing joke about the media, quickly but non-blatantly pointing out that it was their tabloid claws he was running from, and not his own feelings. He was simultaneously holding out for Ama to speak again, wondering how she would take to the hard-assed bait. It wasn’t something he would have planned, bringing such a serious edge to the embryonic stage of whatever it was that was going to happen, but then again, he hadn’t instigated it or mentioned his dead idiot band members in the first instance. However, in a roundabout way, Ama would respond and move onwards from his suicide fable in such a cold impersonal manner that Malik felt a new and fresh admiration, a father’s pride in his daughter. He felt like offering her a post as his renewed band’s publicist there and then. This was the way he expected people to work around him. *Fuck the individuals, the band is all.*

“Was that the end of the band, then?”

“Huh?”

The pride and admiration would fall instead after the surprise.

“When they died, did the band split up?”

Something inside him inflated as he almost laughed at the suggestion. He settled instead for a newscaster matter-of-fact frankness, and resisted sensibly the temptation to puff himself out completely.

“No, no, no. They were only really session players. I kinda do everything, I am Sin Sister. When the time comes, I’ll get new band members”.

He didn’t hear the bravado. Or anything, for that matter.

"I mean, it was bad when it happened, obviously. I liked them a lot, and it was a tragedy, but....."

It was meant to trail off, it wasn't meant to hang in the kitchen air until yanked and bear-hugged by the girl who was getting better and better and dangerously close to his way of thinking.

"But the band is more important after it all?"

Huge grins, clapping hands, and the desire to break out his bag of powdery delights in celebration were all suppressed. She got it.

"Something like that. Maybe not so impersonal".

Smiles for him and for her, and the visible lessening of the heavy vibe. Better. Easier to work within.

"Is that all your equipment in the room back there?"

"Sure is".

"For recording?"

"Yeah".

He dwelled momentarily on the option. It was something to do, to impress her with, right? It sure as shit beat standing around in his kitchen with twinges of awkwardness and tumblers of liquor.

"Do you want to check it out?"

Ama glanced quickly at Sheila, who didn't notice. The younger girl could just as easily have been addressing both her new half-friend and her host.

"Do you mind?"

"No, not at all. Follow me".

He strutted importantly across the faded lino, and back onto the soft carpet of the hallway. Without looking behind him, he cringed that maybe the girls were squabbling over his motives and the sincerity of his actions, over his original invitation, his booze-pushing friendliness, and his willingness to show them around his home. And then he remembered that they were not close enough to squabble. Feeling them at his back, he breathed a little easier.

He had chosen the downstairs room to house his temporary studio because it was the only windowless room in the place. The walls were a sickly cream, broken from the white ceiling only by the band of green that bordered both. The room was lit warmly by a single bulb overhead, with potential assistance being offered but ignored by two desk lamps on the ground in the corner. An assortment of amps, pedals and flight cases lay scattered around the floor on the far side of the room, huddled around the hub of his setup, his sweetly powerful G3 on the thick wooden table. Malik figured it would be dumb of him to

reach for his black SG and rip out a few rounds of his latest riff. They probably wouldn't appreciate his shit anyway. It could also have been equally as dumb to draw attention to the plump bag of white powder partly hidden by his money shoebox on top of his stack. He turned to greet them as they joined him in his dungeon. Ama was already looking past him.

"Wow, what's that onscreen?"

He had to turn and check. It was his current screensaver, an idle-minded adaptation of a 3D animation he had thrown together and scripted in the midsts of a two-day drought during which nothing more than Crüe and Kiss covers came from his strings. He had designed three separate animations, beginning as nothing more than a boring distraction, but eventually developing into some really cool pieces he had every intention of using at some stage. Stage projections, videos, maybe his new album would incorporate CD-ROM material that could make use of his talents. He also wanted to look into the realms of DVD releases, something he'd seen done with a handful of chart singles, and something he felt as though he and his designers could expand into a pretty memorable package to accompany his music. The animation at which he now gazed – feeling the impending approval of his own approved visitor – was a dark mangle of shapes and mists, colours and shades bending in subtle swirls to form pained faces and places. It was bleak without category or meaning. Ama was boldly making her way towards the computer.

"That's a 3D animation I've been working on for the band. Do you like it?"

"Yeah. It's awesome".

Sheila brushed past him on her way to joining Ama in front of the nineteen-inch monitor. Malik wondered how he had not noticed the black-haired girl's scent before as she made an equally impressed noise.

"Are you into computer design?"

She hadn't turned back from the looping images, and as such he could leave his eyes fixed on the back of her head. In turn, all three drank from their near-empty portions.

"Yeah. I want to do it in college".

His brain did the maths quickly. Almost in college – eighteen, nineteen? Shit, it was even legal. Not that she had given him any reason to think otherwise, but ever since the incident in Poughkeepsie with two sisters in the back of his bus and the five thousand dollar payout to their brother to buy their silence, he had kept a wary eye beside his wandering other.

"I have some other pieces that I've done if you wanna see them?"

“Sure”.

He fought the urge to bundle slowly between their two unique variations on hourglasses to make his way to the controls. She could do it while he advised.

“Just hit any key to wake the computer”.

“Right”.

The animation stopped short, and the screen blinked black before glooming onto his desktop, a high-res scan of the artwork from his 1998 album, “Lie-able”. A pack of stamp-sized icons representing shortcuts lay piled to the left of his band’s logo. The speaker barked electronically in exclamation.

“Now click on the *Cinema 4D* icon”.

He paused while she searched through the italics of the software names. The program appeared, and he directed her to opening one of his other designs. It took a few seconds for the complex cast to load.

“I’ll leave you to figure out how to get it running. I’m gonna go fix us some more drinks”.

He waited for a second longer than necessary, leaving either or both space to politely refuse, to call his ruse of getting everybody a little looser and a little more likely to like him. It was not forthcoming, and he carefully decided against asking for their glasses and offering another opportunity to decline. He had plenty more in the kitchen. With both their backs to him, he was free to crane his arm over his main amp and grab the thick bag from behind his shoebox. Back out in the corridor, he rejoiced silently but gleefully that everything he could ever need at that moment in time was either in his hands or immersing themselves in his shit in the room he had just left.

As the second of Malik’s dark creations staggered into its movements, Sheila began to feel a little irritated. The sheer strength of a badly-mixed double shot of Boru had sent bubbles of relaxed giddiness to her brain, and her initial confused reconsideration of Ama’s personality sw eeps had passed. She watched the girl with renewed honest interest during their brief exchanges with the American, and found herself once more fascinated by the complexities of her gentle cute schizophrenia. And a little jealous of the attention she was giving and getting. She wanted to move quickly through the remainder of her artistic chores, and to set off back through the woods with her foreign friend in tow. Maybe they would arrange to meet again that evening, sit down for more drinks and swap further bits of their lives. But minutes after Sheila found herself shedding the minor uneasiness she had felt outside the gates in the sea heat, she was back to negativity, annoyed that Ama was more interested in some stupid computer cartoon than in helping Sheila with her tasks. After all, if it wasn’t for the art thing,

they would not have been there in the first place. She took a little consolation from the fact that at least she was still talking to her, pointing out small intricacies in the animation without being cruel, nasty or sarcastic. None of the mild badness Sheila could have sworn she was detecting outside. Then again, maybe she had been wrong. Maybe the heat was getting to her. Or her hangover. Regardless, it was a little better all around.

“How do I stop this once I’ve started it?”

Sheila’s knowledge of computers didn’t extend beyond email programs and Internet research. Never mind Mac OS 3D animation software.

“I haven’t got a clue”.

“Shit”.

Ama was pushing keys repeatedly without having any effect on the show, which continually returned to the phrase “Life Sold”.

“Hold on, I’ll go ask”.

With her empty glass clutched in her fist, Sheila willingly slipped back out into the corridor. Ama sighed her genuine gratitude, still legally pummelling the keyboard. Sheila was just happy to be able to help in any way at all.

In the kitchen, Malik was filling fresh three-quarter glasses of vodka, and clouding them slightly to the colour of weak urine with the vile orange squash. He returned the bottles to their nest in the fridge, and swivelled to address his polythene friend. His heart dropped a beat as he caught Sheila’s slinking colours slowing down politely through his doorway; he stopped in his tracks, sensing the detectable suspicion of his own sudden change in movement, and also finding the eyes of the girl locked on his bag of sweetness on the counter. He was trapped. He had made one simple selfish error in giving in to his cravings, and now he was facing another payout. She would spin on her heels, go and tell her friend that they were being entertained by some kind of drug baron, and the two of them would run from his home. Ruining any chances or hopes or opportunities to build on where he had laid such fabulous foundations. His mind seemed to be shrugging its shoulders, warning him that not even the awesome social skills of his inner psyche could help him with this one. What the fuck could he say to her? How could he save face when his betrayal was sitting laughing at him, pouting its chunky radiant whiteness, knowing that Sheila could not miss it?

“That’s a nice stash you have there”.

Reacting as if she had slapped him stingingly across his cheek, Malik stepped out of the panicked trance, and asked his ears to play back her interruption one more time. His eyes, though directed at hers in guilt and tense preparation, had not been focused, and as he squeezed the blur, he settled on the knowing approving smirk that commanded Sheila's lips. Her refined look spoke loudly and clearly, as loudly as her statement. Holy *shit*. He almost shook his head in disbelief, yet retained enough calm to act quickly enough to treat her the way he assumed she now wanted to be treated.

"Do you indulge?"

He spoke and smiled by means of suggestion as his brain ticked over happily. *Shit*, there was no real reason to be surprised, now was there? He had admitted that he had lied about being a writer, without losing ground, and then been told he was not to blame for getting thrown out of that creepy redneck bar. He had managed to loosen his guests up considerably with liquor all around, and was in the process of hooking up some more. A *lot* more. Caught with a shitload of dust, and now this chick was coming on like she knew all about that shit, and then some.

"Yeah, whenever I can".

A flash of something else in her eyes. It was all smiles now. There was only one sensible step forward. A gracious, communal step.

"Do you wanna line?"

If anything, Sheila had bizarrely seen the slumped bag on the counter-top as being a ticket to snatching back a little of the ground she had been losing to Ama. Ever since their arrival, and the internal battle that swelled between her tiny insecurities regarding her guide's moods, and the seedling jealousy, she had wanted to arrest the situation to become the focus, to at least be on par with her new semi-friend. Even if that meant trudging through the gardens and getting the art stuff out of the way, so be it, she would be in control. Recognising the name of the American's band, and knowing a little of their background had rewarded her momentarily, but within minutes, Ama was taking control once more and sitting down to fuck with his computer. Now, having accidentally stumbled upon the secretive recreation habits of the tall dark stranger, it afforded her an opportunity to be cool, to be hip to his doings, to react maturely and understandingly. The truth was she could not disapprove of anything; she was pretty sure she knew what she was looking at, and it was no big deal to her. She'd had a ball on the three occasions she'd tried coke that year; and just as much fun watching Eoghan's face as she recounted moving onwards to Class A. She was enjoying the drink and the challenge and the surroundings, in no particular order. She

could get all the photography shit out of the way later. For now, she had a totally unexpected hand to enjoy herself with, and a way in which to till the common soil she shared with the rock star. Besides, how wicked would that be, getting wrecked in a place like that with one of the guys from Sin Sister and a mood-swinging Russian waitress? What a tale that would be to tell in October. And it was a far more favourable proposition than going back to the hotel and fending off Eoghan's dumb efforts.

"Sure, if that's ok?"

Of course it was ok. It would make everything more fun; it was the environment within which he did all his best work. How could it not be ok?

"Sure it is. Plenty to go around".

He pulled the bag open, and fingered a small avalanche out onto the smooth faux-marble top. He padded down his pockets, realised that he'd left his kit in the music room, and made for the cutlery drawer, asking Sheila over his shoulder if she had anything to cut with. She pulled her wallet from her ass pocket, decided against using her replacement bank card, and offered instead a supermarket Super Club card. Malik laughed at the corny coloured plastic before gripping it tightly and defacing it with a task its promoters would not have encouraged. He sliced four fine tracks into the pattern of white, and handed Sheila back her card, wiping the edge traces clean into his fingers. He then pulled a tightly rolled twenty note from his hip pocket and smoothed its perfect cylindrical contours before passing it to his new assistant. He breathed an unseen wind of relief, remembering that he had rolled the note inside out after his last little accident. It meant that the blood was on the inside, speckling the inner tube, and out of sight. His mind skirted back to the incident, and he felt a sharp tingle in his septum, which he reassured with a stroke of his thumb. It was not deterrent enough to stop him from going again.

Sheila leaned over eagerly to take her line, her hip brushing against his thigh as she did so. She performed with all the nervousness of an inexperienced child facing retribution if the parent's chosen sporting task being undertaken is not satisfactorily completed. To Malik, she seemed to do enough to enjoy full benefits. To Sheila, it was as shatteringly nauseating as before, a horrible feeling in her sinuses which subsided once she had squashed her nose responsively with her free hand. Malik waited until she had attended to her watering eyes before asking with his hand for the inductive aid. His execution was more expert, more fluid, and ultimately more rewarding. He turned to smile at the still-struggling girl as the first sensory highs filtered through to them both.

“Would your friend take some?”

As far as he was concerned, it was a soft tentative step, nothing more than a kind and generous offer to get the missing guest onto their instant gravy train of goodness. He would be pleased by Sheila’s inability to soak up his query as being anything above politeness, but perturbed by her answer. She was adamant that the furry cotton wad that seemed to have replaced her tongue would not prevent her from answering as quickly and as thoroughly as she wanted to, a little more relaxed than before, but still bound hand and foot by the remaining oddity of the day.

“I doubt it. She doesn’t seem like the type”.

She sensed the question that would follow, and intercepted, feeling a little better for it, and for something else that was tickling her insides.

“We’re not really friends, we only met yesterday”.

Malik’s mouth broadened to show his teeth.

“I *knew*it. Just by the way you were acting”.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Damn straight”.

“She’s a little weird, I guess”.

His interest peaked above the wavy rolls of tasty dizziness.

“How?”

“I don’t know, she changes personality all the time, she’s quiet and cute one minute, and nasty the next”.

He could live, breathe and work with nasty. Oh man, could he work with nasty. He moved back to tidy up the remaining lines to draw some attention away from his next probe.

“Might seem like a dumb question, but do I have a chance with her?”

He kept his body turned away from Sheila, not wanting to see any traces of uncertainty, discomfort or strains of reprimand that may have formed. She thought she knew to where he was pointing, and was briefly taken aback, the surprise heightened by the high.

“Like...that?”

Didn’t seem to be disturbed to him.

“Yeah”.

“Um, I don’t know. She was a little creeped out yesterday, when you said you were a writer and she knew you were a musician”.

“Ah”.

His chopping and scraping took on an extra bite as he accounted for the lie.

“But she doesn’t seem so bothered by it now. I don’t know”.

“Right”.

He picked the rolled note from the counter and handed it to her again. She was naïvely unused to doing lines so quickly in succession, but figured she'd be able for the challenge. He timed his pounce perfectly, waiting until she was bent over completely, tube in nostril, her leg warm and close to his own before asking.

“Well, if there's anything you can do to help out, I'd appreciate it”.

She was too far gone to halt the process, and inhaled the chalky powder sharply just as her brain processed the words. *What the fuck could I do*, she asked as her eyes shut down indignantly once more. She reeled backwards, feeling the force and knowing that she did not enjoy this one. Was it going to be too much? The American didn't seem to care, easily vacuuming his second. By the time he had adjusted himself and swung around happily, her bad reactions had given way willingly to the longer-lasting pluses. He sniffed deeply.

“I'm serious. Help me out, and I'll help you out. Whatever you want, a bag of this shit, a couple of grand, whatever”.

And hence the question in Sheila's marvellously light head took on new greedy diction, and became what *can* I do to help?

He collected the three large glasses and followed Sheila back along the corridor to the studio, where Ama had figured out how to stop the animation, load another, and set it running. Malik confided in Sheila that his bag was her bag, that she could pop out and fix herself up whenever she wanted, but that they would keep it from Ama for the time being. Despite the fact that she was now enjoying the fullness of her energetic confidence and sharp appreciation of the unusual setting, Sheila had enough in her to realise that another shot so quickly would be stretching the limits of her tolerance. Maybe later. She now had a cold mitten of orange and vodka to contend with, although she would have preferred a plastic cup, or something she could have bitten nimbly into.

Twenty minutes later, they were laughing and joking like old friends. Even without the assistance of the narcotics, all three would have been bordering on tipsy, swallowing potent mouthfuls at an alarming rate, necessitating another refill from Malik, who was glad he had struggled with the bottles alongside his potatoes in the dank heat of the day before. He helped himself to another quick trail as he did his cocktail mixing thing. Sheila wondered comically how she had ever doubted Ama's attributes as they smiled and chattered their way through the unexpected session. Malik coaxed the girl at his computer to abandon the 3D

software, and to navigate to his band's official website, where he wowed them with his awesome Flash intro. His pride would not let him bypass the opportunity to show them the streaming footage of his superbly sarcastic acceptance speech at the 2000 Video Music Awards. He had not bothered making an appearance at the Hollywood Palladium to accept his gong for "Feeble Gauge" – Best Hard Rock Video, sending instead a scripted and taped response he had filmed in the kitchen of his favourite Japanese restaurant.

"I've never heard of that song".

The Quicktime clip had finished, and Ama had turned around to him with eyes that glazed as sweetly as he felt. He tried to calculate how much she had drank. As much as him, if not more, although he did have a slight ulterior advantage.

"Wow, you're missing out".

It was a damned good song, one he'd written for the soundtrack to *Gorge* but pulled back for inclusion on his own album when the response had been so good.

"Can I hear it?"

"Sure".

He answered without thinking or realising that he had not brought any of his own CD's with him when he had jumped the US ship. He had never bothered gathering together his own mp3's on the Mac, and the only full-length clips available to download from his site were shitty demos and unreleased crap.

"Actually, no, I don't have it with me. Sorry".

"Well that's a letdown".

Still turned away from the computer, Malik saw that she looked every bit the lethally seductive music business ball-breaker, successful because nobody dared to challenge her, and because those who did were fucked – voluntarily or involuntarily. Arms folded over the top of the chair, glass drooping, and eyes that he *wanted* to be suggestive. In a few years time, she would have his entire mindless gender in her grip.

And then he remembered something else.

"Hey, I have some new stuff that I've been working on over here, if you want to hear that?"

"Cool. What do you think?"

Sheila was pleased to be consulted, and gabbled her permission, adding unnecessary comments of her own without being able to stop herself. It seemed that Ama locked eyes with her for a little longer than usual, but it was far from uncomfortable. Malik broke in to beckon Ama from his chair, standing back

to prevent the playful contact that he would have loved but called as being too forward, too soon. She was left standing in the middle of the room while he busied himself at the console, until Sheila directed her towards a flat-top waist-height amp stack against the far wall. Sheila rightly concluded their current alcohol-fuelled spike of friendliness was probably not enough to allow her to offer Ama the use of the arm of the only other chair in the room, the rough tartan piece into which Sheila herself had flopped. There was a sudden hum in the room, and Malik rocked his head back and forth, swinging around to face them triumphantly as a booming rhythm of sequenced drums bounced forth from a deceptively small set of speakers. The sound was fantastic, great thunder claps of bass reverberating along the floor to each kick drum beat, and the subtle jungle influences of 808 snare and hi-hats swooshing around the walls through a dramatic flanger effect. And this was only the intro, jamming straight into Sheila's gut as Malik sucked his lips into his mouth in preparation for the song kicking in. When it came, it came even as a surprise to him. He had not yet heard it at this volume, and had even forgotten how good it sounded. Layers of fuming guitars textured perfectly over each other, nothing of the main riff lost, and everything gained from the additional sounds. The bass rumbled beneath it, now a constant earthquake on the floor and in their muscles. He beamed uncontrollably, unbelievably happy with his creation, and delighted that he was getting to share it. The song broke itself down through stutters into the tamer confines of the verse, a tribal but electronic loop the only accompaniment to his quiet, moaned nothing-words.

"Wow, that is *wicked!*"

Sheila was astounded by how much she felt the music, and took the relative quiet of the moment to shout her appraisal. Malik's smile stretched, and his eyes shot to Ama, who seemed a little less enthused. She knew that she didn't have to raise her voice to be heard over that part in time, and nodded her head, looking at Sheila.

"It's good, yeah".

The verse worked itself to its conclusion without any further vocal additions, and shattered back into the grandeur of the chorus. Sheila could no longer help herself. She pressed down hard on the arms of her chair, and hauled herself out onto the carpet. The beats were calling, and she was in no position to ignore them. She began throwing her hips in tight ovals of movement, gyrating violently, rotating her body with small steps as she went, her arms remaining in controlled stasis about her head. Malik looked on in huge approval, hollering his opinion, hoping without looking at the girl that Ama would too find her way onto the dancefloor. The music continued to stamp its authority, and Sheila swayed

accordingly, the exaggerated lines of her feminine contours drawing lines of salt on Malik's lips that needed to be licked away. He watched as Sheila opened her eyes, and smirked widely at him. She turned her back to him to shake herself in the manner of an unpractised bellydancer, and facing Ama. She was dancing now regardless of the sounds, and moved in front of the other girl.

"Come on!"

She took Ama's hands from their resting place on her knees, and tugged them towards her own body. No give, apart from Ama's head jolting forwards.

"No, I..."

She wasn't given time or breath to finish, as Sheila regrouped her fiery energy into a second hard pull, and this time yielded reward. Ama had relaxed her weight's hold on the amp in the wake of the first attempt, and was unguarded and ultimately surprised. She lurched out into Sheila's arms, who allowed her to crush softly into her chest before spinning the shock-faced girl around and grabbing her arms just above the elbows. Super smooth, but with a hint of weather-beaten roughness. She levered Ama further away from her, and let go. Her expression had changed to weak annoyance, almost completely tarred by amusement.

"Dance!", urged Sheila, attempting to show her the way, insistence in her laughing eyes.

Ama stood still for a moment, tightened her hair back over her ears, and began to move. Conservatively, seemingly cautious of herself, hands and arms tight to her front. She didn't really feel like moving, but didn't feel like standing there while Sheila grooved around her either. The safe ground between seemed to sample enough of the primal swing to allow her to retreat back to her seat and her drink, having exhausted any interest her dancing friend may have had in forcing her to join in.

Malik's mouth was open, his eyes darting from girl to girl in expectation. How good was this? She was out there, dancing – albeit goofishly – to his track, his art. He would have been a lot happier if she was following the same sexy patterns that the other girl was forging, but then again she was fuelled by a little something extra. Maybe that would come in time. It was a fine picture; two cute girls dancing around his studio room, one the very vision of exuberance, the other leaving a lot to his imagination. Which was burning a path into his real conscience all on its own.

The thought arrived with all the urgency and the demands of a diabetic's insulin. He swung around to his computer, fumbled around under

manuals and playschool-style score sheets until he found what he was looking for. He cradled the tiny DV camcorder in one hand while searching furtively and frantically for the *iMovie* icon on his monitor. It had been a while since he'd used it, but he remembered connecting it to the FireWire port at some point during the previous weeks. He launched the application, watched with fractured breath as the empty output window and controls woke themselves, and he switched the camera on to test it. Gloriously, an elevation from beneath of his own face appeared in the coaster-sized window on the left, peering away from the camera as he stared at the screen, bordered by banks of editing options and switches. He lifted the camera to his shoulder and aimed behind him. The two girls were dancing in the window on his computer, as freely and as apprehensively respectively as they were mere feet away from him. He was aware that the song was within a minute of ending. He clicked on the record button on the controls onscreen, and turned to face the dancers, the camcorder held to his eye. Ama had her back to him, and over her shoulder, Sheila saw the camera. She pointed with a refreshed smile towards Malik, and Ama followed the finger with her eyes. The look of relaxed comfort and wonder on her face faded into a concerned nothing, and her movements lost a little of their little vigour. Malik saw this, and tried to assure her as he best knew how.

"No, keep going, keep going!"

Ama suddenly felt like doing anything other than keep going. She was uneasy with the camera, and uneasy with the tone of Malik's voice over the music. She had stopped moving completely, and adopted the position of an irate mother about to scold with hands on hips. She did not like being filmed. Malik's mood blackened. The song was shunting through its climax, stopping and starting, giving him gates to shout through, and snapping them shut just as quickly.

"Come on, *dance!*"

Ama saw the caveman look in his mouth as he chewed one side of his face to close one eye, the other peering through the camcorder viewing lens. What she didn't see was Sheila behind her, still moving as passionately as before, edging nearer to Ama's back. What she didn't see was the forked streak of inspiration that lit Sheila's eyes, looking past the statuesque girl to the cameraman, and hearing "*couple of grand*", plucked easily from her recently-used list.

"*Money shot*", she whispered internally, and stepped directly behind Ama to make her bid.

Ama felt Sheila's hands alighting on her waist, a sudden but not entirely unpleasant sensation she had not been expecting. She wanted to turn her face around, to nicely voice her desire to put an end to the stupid disco, but Sheila was too close to her; she could feel her through the backside of her trousers, through the breath on her hair, and through the firm grip on the thin fat of her pelvis, which her captor tried to roll in time with the music. And then Ama felt hard fingers grabbing a handful of her T-shirt on either side, and in one swift movement, pulling her sky blue top over her torso as high as her armpits, the instant tight knot of material pinching painfully into flesh. She was forced to bite down on her tongue, and felt a second instance of sharp pain in her mouth, which seemed to swell with a cloud of sour numbness. As Sheila's fingers relaxed, Ama tugged hard and true on her T-shirt, covering quickly the exposed skin, knowing not yet any indignance or horror beyond the cold surprise. She pulled the garment tightly down, smoothing and stretching it beyond its own intention, and wincing simultaneously at the stings under her arms and in her mouth, and at the prickly scatter across the large square of her body that had just seen light. Ama turned slowly around to face Sheila, who had backed off a little, laughing. Ama's own features gathered themselves into a storm of incredulous shock, though her mouth shook with immediate embarrassment and what would become disgust. Sheila's nonplussed reaction was not helping. Had she been looking at the smooth skin of Ama's back as she yanked at her clothing, she would have seen it unbroken by any kind of underclothing tracklines. And perhaps then felt a different kind of proportional remorse.

"What did you do that for?"

Over the dying embers of the song that had caused all the trouble, Ama's voice was low and seemingly unemotional, at odds with how she was feeling. Though still euphoric after her consumptions and the high-octane workout of her dance, Sheila could tell that her good-time cheerful face was at least a little out of place. It seemed to her that Ama was playing another unusual swing card, reacting coolly and quietly to what was just a joke. Sheila was still moving freely, now nervously, and her nerves found their way into a retort that was by no means as confident and as certain as it sounded.

"Oh come on, lighten up, it's nothing".

They were the wrong words to say, but she could not prevent them from jumping out. Ama's expression changed only to allow her mouth to curl numbly towards intense dislike. Sheila noticed that the bass and the beats had abandoned her, and she was jiggling loosely to frays of quiet picked guitar that did not deserve jiggling. It didn't matter, standing still wasn't an option just then; she

was too scared to not have her mind distracted by her own movements. She was too worried by Ama's eyes.

"Why did you do that?"

As soon as he had seen Sheila's hands snake around onto Ama, Malik had taken the camcorder away from his eye, happy that the focus would not change, that he would still be recording perfectly while allowing himself a full two-eye view of the ensuing live show. He watched as the girl behind tried to forcefully inject some rhythm into the static hips of the girl in front. He was as unprepared and as surprised by the exposure of Ama's upper body as the unsuspecting model herself. His jaw dropped, and remained lowered for some seconds after she had recovered her dignity. As she slowly faced away from him to confront her procrastinator, he was blessed by not having to decently take his eyes from her. The imprint on his mind was astonishingly vivid, a branding that did not soothe or cool with time. He could not believe he had seen what he had just seen, and he could not believe how good it had been. Through the shadowy seconds-old memory of her sandy brown skin, he could still make out the change in temperature in the room. Given the choice, he would let them get on with it, sort out their grievance between them, it was nothing to do with him. But as he watched Sheila's face frown itself into useless uncertainty, he boldly stepped in, lamenting to himself that there should be any need for down sides; after all, they were just having a good time, right?

"Hey, what's the problem?"

And although Sheila welcomed the return of the host as though he was offering immortality, and her slightly freaked eyes left Ama's face for his, the girl with her hand to her mouth did not turn to address him. Her demanding glare continued to burn on Sheila's cheeks, her voice still racked by disbelief and an unwarranted shame.

"What did she do that for?"

At a loss for a reasonable answer, he remembered the light plastic weight in the palm of his hand, and remembered something else. With a choking excited lump in his throat that could well have been his heart, he reached for the small circular transparent white and blue mouse, span back around to the screen and clicked off the recording. Over a minute of footage, but the last couple of seconds or so would be nothing more than a useless documentary on the carpet. The hard drive in the similarly-coloured tower beside his monitor whirred and babbled as he set the movie playing. There they were, one and two, lively and not-so-lively, dancing to silence because he had neglected to switch on his mic.

He wasn't aware of anything being said in the real room; he figured they were probably staring each other out, but he no longer gave a shit. He grabbed the playing progress indicator with the cursor and dragged it along a third of the way. The images sped cartoonishly before settling on Ama now at the front, the hidden Sheila's hands around her. *Here we go*. His eyes rushed from the relaxed reluctant face back down to the hands; he didn't want to miss anything. And then the T-shirt came free, up over her dark flat stomach, over firm and unrestricted breasts, eventually resting to obscure from the lower part of her face to the tip of her sternum. Having sorted itself out once, his jaw fell again in simple appreciation. Holy shit, he had it on tape. He had it *recorded*. He watched breathlessly as she recovered and turned away without looking at him or at the camera. He dragged the footage back a few seconds, and watched again, totally oblivious to the stars of his clip as they stood in the same room. He watched it a third time, and then moved back to the beginning of the derobing. He then spoke over his shoulder without editing or considering what it was he was saying.

"I wouldn't worry about it, you look great".

Ama semi-circled in a dramatically slow step, as if she was mentally trying to assure her mind of something before she made a fool of herself, as though she was asking to hear again what she had just heard. She faced Malik not remembering anything about the video camera, but prepared to disgustedly challenge his leer that when caught off her guard, and completely intruded to the point of being half-naked in front of virtual strangers, she looked *great*.

"What?"

Malik wore a dumb expression of stoned happiness. Even Sheila, who had been watching him at intervals as he worked the computer, and knew to what he was alluding, thought he was making a mistake. Still his stupid words continued.

"Seriously, check it out, it's great".

He beckoned towards the screen, and Ama closed in to look at what he wanted her to see. The still and blurred picture in the grey window that dominated the left hand side of the display jumped into life. She saw herself, the symmetric focal point, whichever way she looked at it. She saw the hands, and the rising sky blue, and the swells and bumps of her uncovered chest. Her arms shot instinctively across her trunk, and she felt sick. She remembered discarding the uncomfortable piece of underwear when she had changed her clothes some time earlier. When she had been changing from her work clothes to accompany somebody on a stupid nature hike to the American's home, the same somebody who had violated her in this way, and then tried to tell her that it was no big deal.

And just in case she was in danger of forgetting that it had happened, there was a *recording*.

“Get rid of that”.

To her, anything else was unthinkable and wrong, and simply not an option. Malik reeled to suggest otherwise; he still believed he could convince her to see it his way, the fun way.

“No way, honey, that is good shit. That’s gonna be in a video”.

Ama remained clamped to herself in a frail shaking bundle, not believing that what she was hearing was real.

“No, no video, delete it”.

“Aw, don’t worry, you won’t see faces, it’ll be computer-generated or some shit”.

He hadn’t a clue what he was talking about, but it might have sounded like he did. He would not be deleting anything. Ama didn’t care; she was only hearing the growling and clammering sounds of a bad dream.

“No”.

“Don’t *worry* about it, it’s great”.

And that was it. The sounds of the dream reared up like cobras above the influence of the vodka, the shock, the disbelief and all else. It was a horrible sound in her ears, an insistent screeching that kept time admirably with the throbbing pain in her tongue. *Get out, get out, get out*, it screamed, tearing shreds of energy from unnecessary stores and sending them to her legs. She hopped to her left and arrowed towards the door, beginning the fearless and initially directionless sprint of a soul running from danger. She pulled herself around the frame of the door, and made for the kitchen in preference to the front door; it was nearer. Once free of the corridor that seemed to have narrowed, she panicked in discovering that she didn’t know how to get out. Her eyes locked on a broad double sliding door at the most distant corner of the kitchen. She ran towards it, and pulled down on the handle, aware of a commotion behind her as Sheila too careered into the sunny room. She was calling Ama’s name, and something about hanging on. Ama found the key in the lock and twisted it. The lever depressed easily and she hauled the heavy glass door ajar, creating a gap through which she could just about squeeze. Sheila was calling for her to look at something, and Ama couldn’t help doing so as she forced herself half-way out into the sunshine. The girl who had exposed her to the pervert with the camera was about ten feet away from her, holding up a fist-sized bag of white something, eyebrows raised.

“Hey, hang on, it’s alright”.

Ama's unchanging face must have requested more explanation or elaboration.

"Look, do a line of this, chill everybody out".

The object of her pushing did not reply, or even look back as she moved free of the door. She ran across the hot paved patio until she saw that the high gates at the bottom of the garden were closed. Not wanting to risk being delayed in finding that they were unopenable, she ran to the side of the house, and circumvented the shaded red walls, coming out onto the slightly more familiar territories of the frontal drive area. The gates were still open, and she ran through without altering her pace, or glancing backwards. The voices had not let up yet, and she knew that they wouldn't until she reached the cool protective arms of the forest.

Back in the kitchen, Sheila remained bemused and baffled by the local's over-reaction, and weighed the bag of cocaine absent-mindedly in her hand as she waited. Something banged against a wall out in the hallway, and she heard Malik cursing his way from the music room to where she stood.

## chapter sixteen

As she ran along the unofficial path through the trees, Ama fought with a myriad of thumbnailed pictures, the last hour of her life depicted as a catalogue of small images – similar to one of the photo galleries Malik had showed them on his band's website, but with each stamp-sized portrait now representing one descriptive second of what she was running away from. Her mind clicked on each thumbnail in turn, bringing the full picture to the foreground, allowing her to view briefly colourful explanations for the silent wailing and the sickness that seemed real but untraceable. The three of them, standing with matching glasses of orange something in an odd sunny Mexican standoff. One of the 3D animations. Sheila, dancing on her own. Sheila, her face rosy and expectant, close to Ama's as she dragged her from her seat. The unshakeable sight of her own slim tanned figure on a computer screen, the colours of her jeans, her naked skin and her ruffled T-shirt forming a human flag that was voyeuristic and wrong. Unable to keep an eye on the treacherous woodland floor, Ama fell foul of a mischievous root, and tripped heavily, flying through the air to land and slide on her front. The pain in her tongue was bumped aside as she bit into her lower lip upon hitting the ground, feeling it begin to jut and bleed almost instantaneously. She could taste the salty iron as she pulled herself up, her clothes now marked in green and brown, and her hands caked with soil. Despite the dumb warm promise of the scattered mottle of bruises that would develop across her limbs, there was no time for anything more than a quick smear of her arm across her mouth; she was not far enough away yet. With still no clear indication of what to do, who to tell, or how to fix what had been broken, she was running blindly, but needing to run was the one thing she could be sure of. The fall had taken a little of her breath away, and her speed dropped off accordingly to a tired, painful trot.

She burst out into the bright afternoon, her eyes not fully prepared for the shock of light, and the various pains around her body coming together to form one powerful apex in her brain. Wincing and turning to her left, she ran across the beaten sketched grass to make for home. She wasn't to know that her parents would not be returning from their monthly shopping trip to Wexford until some time between six and seven, as the note held down by the apple magnet on the fridge would testify. Jogging along the familiar road, weariness wrapped itself around her shoulders, and her feet complained to a halt, and then a walk; nearly there anyway. Licking her wounded lip softly with her tongue, she could see human shapes just ahead of her, three darkly-dressed thin males – two sitting on one of the front garden walls, the other standing – and a fuller figured man in

white who seemed to be digging something on the far side of the wall a little further along the road. As she got nearer, the first three roughly-matched shaven heads defined themselves through the cooling haze, but she wasn't putting names to faces. She didn't really need to; once past, she was within a minute of her own gate. But there was something unusual about the three guys who weren't bobbing up and down in fits of gardening efficiency, an abnormality Ama could not fix upon as she tightened her eyes for better clarity. Whereas beyond them the gardener's plump arms glistened with beads of sweat and weals of life, the thin men's faces and hands seemed to be of a sickly transparent pallor. As though they were viciously unwell, kicked from their invalid beds by preachy watchers eager for them to take advantage of the sun's healing powers. Ama looked down at her own hands, crossed carelessly above her groin, daubed in pretty shades of green and brown, but still healthy. The pain epicentre was there still there, somewhere, but she would be attending to it soon.

The guy who was standing held off on kicking at the wall between his comrades to peer into the silhouettes at the approaching girl. Her gait was that of some kind of unspoken distress, fatigue, pain or inebriation. He quickly called the attention of the small group, who in turn then recognised the girl as she got to within a few metres of them. They saw the eerie frown of concentration across her brow, and the dirt on her clothes. When she stopped to consider the standing guy calling her name in question, they saw the dirt continue onto her face, and streaks of blood around her swollen mouth. This was one of their own, a female of their own, in an advanced state of physical dishevellement. Something grew inside three minds tortured by boredom, something that managed to encompass pity, anger and a burning need for answers. And a defendant to pin themselves upon.

"What happened to you?"

Her eyes refused to settle on any of them, fixing instead on the occasional cars shooting past at the top of the lane. She touched her lip gingerly with the back of her wrist, a part of her wondering how bad it looked, if it was as obvious as it seemed to the boys.

"Hey, what happened?"

Two variations on the same question, no indication that she could simply walk past minding her own business. They should not have been there to greet her; she *knew* this, but at a loss for any further justification, assumed that it was their shared sickness that should have kept them indoors or elsewhere. Still, maybe she could use them to practice telling somebody more important. She

searched retardedly for words to put to the pictures. She saw Sheila and her bag of white flour calling her back to the Hall.

"I was at the Hall".

They were all standing now, and they all jumped to complete attention at the mention of the Hall, three soapy brains making the kinds of assumptions they wanted to be horrified to hear about.

"The Hall back there?"

She nodded, regretting it instantly as the migraine introduced itself with a timely cheer.

"Where the Yank is?"

"Yeah".

"What did he do to you?"

One of them had already smelled the fumes on her breath, carried out his own remote forensic examination, the results of which he wished to share with the investigating team.

"Did he make you drink?"

"Yeah, but that's not it".

"What is it?"

She was annoyed with herself for not being to able to offer any more than snappy captions to the pictures. It didn't sound right. It made her sound stupid. But if it was enough to get her away from the interfering delayers, she supposed it would be ok. She just wanted to get away from them.

"He tried to make me dance...Sheila took my top off...there was a camera, and a video of me on the computer".

Silence, as the three took in details and formed pictures of events they were not expecting to hear of. Ama listened back to her words and realised that they weren't as poor as she had thought. It wasn't so hard to explain after all. One of the boys spoke through gritted teeth.

"Did he hit you?"

"No, no. I fell when I was running back here".

He definitely hadn't hit her. He had just creeped her out with a video of her with her chest showing, that was it really. Another voice, perhaps a little choked.

"Why were you running?"

"I saw the video. I had...no top on. He wouldn't stop it. I didn't know what to do, so I ran. And I fell. They tried to make me stay, there was drugs".

The response was practically lost in the responder's throat.

"Drugs?"

"Cocaine, I think".

The first guy who had hailed her stepped off the path and onto the road, rubbing the base of his neck viciously with his hand. With him no longer blocking her way, Ama resumed her journey, moving through the three silent familiar strangers without a word, and not turning to answer any of the half-hearted calls or queries about her health that were thrown after her. She was past them, almost at her home, and had quickly and easily figured out how to explain what had happened to her in the Yank's Hall. Maybe now it was up to somebody else to figure out what then to do. She distractedly supposed that her one statement was going to suffice for the entire populace of her road, that the bush telegraph was in working order, and kept her head down as she strode past the gardener, who had been standing upright for almost a minute; postponing his chore to ease his whimpering spine, and to peer curiously at the odd doings of the girl with the dirty face and clothes.

Loughie eased the tip of his spade handle into its rightful place under his chin, and felt a pencilled line of water lose itself in an eyebrow. She wasn't right, and that much was for sure. Besides the muck and the grass and the little bit of blood that *had* to mean badness afoot, he didn't like the expression on her face. It was strange, and she was doing strange things, and making him feel unusual in the process. He called her name, momentarily proud to do so with only a minor stammer. Ama was surprised and annoyed by the second hailing, for she had been sure that an uninterrupted last leg of the journey was a foregone conclusion. She had no trouble returning blankly the name of the man resting on his tool, but made to move away without entertaining him any further. When he persisted in pointing out her blatantly disturbed condition – *and if Loughie can tell it*, she thought quickly, *I must look like shit* – she paused sportingly to offer a clearly worded bite-sized account of a fall in the woods up near the Hall. Whether or not it was enough to satisfy Big Loughie's concern was irrelevant; by the time she had dropped the two sentences, she was on her way again, and grimly capable of ignoring his follow-up statements.

Two minutes later, Billy Ryan puffed his way sweatily around the corner, driven only and barely by the cooling knowledge that he would be out of his uniform in no time, and into his favourite slacks and short-sleeved shirt. The heat and the effect it was having on his body was ridiculous. If he had any more officiating to do that evening, he would be doing it in his own clothes. The only concession he was willing to make to procedure was maybe his peaked hat upon his head, but then again, turning his hand to a little gentle gardening would

necessitate a hat of some kind to protect his peeling head. It might as well be the rough regulation navy effort.

He shouted a weather-related greeting to Loughie Chancer long before he reached him, giving the big man time to adjust his standing position, and to go over the words in his mind. Even by his movements and the creased look of importance on his face, Sergeant Ryan knew that Loughie had an agenda of some kind, something he deemed important enough to share. He smiled parentally; the village knew and liked Loughie as one of their harmless own. He was in his forties, slow of brain and yet conscious of it, a gentle barrel of a man who got through his years by picking up the odd gardening and maintenance jobs he could be trusted with. Originally from somewhere else – his memory would not stretch to remembering a placename – he had made Dunfarring his home, living in a tiny flat over the garage at the priest's house. Theories had formed over the nineteen years since his sudden arrival, and the women of the village now believed firmly that he had been abandoned at the strand car park by an unspecified female figure – a mother, sister or aunt, perhaps – maybe even a lover, fantasised the true romantics. For each Christmas, Loughie would work himself into a happy state of excitement matching those of the children who were waiting for Santa, certain that this was the year his Mollie was coming back for him. And each year he would slink away back to his one-roomed flat for a period of no less than seven days, before returning fresh and willing to tackle another year with a smile. Never answering any of the heart-broken mothers who asked him with tears in their eyes to tell them all about the elusive Mollie.

“So what is it with you this time, big man?”

Billy could read the agitated note on the big round face, and wondered if the part-time gardener had accidentally taken the life of another worm. Loughie seemed troubled right enough.

“I think you should go find Ama, Officer Ryan”.

It was a mistake of rank that no length of patience could ever rectify, so it was always allowed pass.

“Ama? Why is that, Loughie?”

He looked down at the steam that was ridiculously rising from the fattest part at the front of his thigh. Loughie too glanced at the phenomenon before turning his head to gaze uneasily up along the empty road towards the junction.

“She was here. All dirty, her clothes and her face. And she was bleeding here”.

He touched the tip of a clay-nailed little finger to the corner of his mouth, now holding the total interest and co-operation of the uniformed man.

"Did you ask her what happened?"

Proudly, "I did, sir".

"Well?"

"She said she fell up near the Hall".

"She fell?"

"That is right".

"At the Hall".

"Yes".

"What was she doing at the Hall?"

"She didn't tell me".

Loughie's face dropped as he considered the lessening of his worth as a fact-finder. Billy moved to reassure him.

"Don't worry, you've done well in passing on this much. Is she away home?"

"Yes".

He had watched to be certain.

"Fine. I will call in on my own way home. It's probably nothing, but there's no harm in checking, right?"

The troubled look remained.

"She was kinda strange too".

"How do you mean?"

A pause, and a hasty rearrangement of words. He didn't want to sound crazy.

"She stopped over there, and was talking to herself".

Billy followed the thrust hand back towards Gogan's.

"Talking to herself?"

"Yes. Like she was having a con-ver-say-shun with herself".

He struggled but coped with the multi-syllabic word. Billy didn't see the connection – people talked to themselves around these parts all the time. At least the older folk did.

"But how is that strange?"

Loughie was not pleased at having to go into any more detail. The policeman should have believed him straight away; it was strange.

"I don't know. She was walking and stopped and then talked for a little while and then started walking to me".

"Did you hear what she was saying?"

"No, she was quiet".

“Right. I’ll ask her about it. Thank you, Loughie, you’ve been very helpful”.

He reached out to shake one of the saucer-like hands. Loughie supposed that his job had been completed.

“Thank you, Officer”.

Billy ambled thoughtfully up along the grass verge, still intending to check up on his clumsy neighbour, but thinking nothing more of it besides the fact that he was accepting that while younger kids fell and scraped and injured themselves all the time, it wasn’t quite so common with young men or women of her age. He bundled Loughie’s bare facts together, and wondered again what she had been doing around the Hall. He knew that the insolent and trouble-making American was up there, and felt an instant pricking chill around his throat. Had she crossed the bastard, and paid for it? Had she been caught snooping around the grounds and taken a beating for her trespass? He felt his face redden and his heart seize. Jesus, if anything had been done to her by that reprobate, Billy would tear his fucking head off himself. All he needed was an excuse, and by thunder this would be some excuse, if risen. He injected a little pace into his step, eager to at least solidify the basics before worrying about any action to follow.

Sergeant Ryan strode past his own cottage – which in itself was an unsettling novelty – and directly to the door of Number Nine. He pressed firmly down on the white plastic bell button, but his call of concern went unheeded, unheard by Ama as she showered. He tried again, supplementing with a volley of sharp knocks, but remained unanswered. He scratched his head in annoyance, and wondered nervously if Oleg had taken her off to the hospital or even the main police station in Wexford already. That would be a blow to the local sergeant’s worth, having his link in the chain of custodial authority overlooked without consideration. Would they not have first called next door, found that he was out and driven into the village looking for him? Were they undermining his law enforcing abilities, just like the Yank criminal had? He kicked his way back out onto the street and turned into his own front garden, and dispatched a mouthful of bitter saliva at a waving red geranium. *Let’s see how the American undermines a fucking good beating*, he sulked in response.

His wife knew nothing of any drama with the neighbours, and confirmed that there hadn’t been anybody looking for him all afternoon. Unguided and still bristling with even the suggestion that the Yank had laid a finger on Ama, he barged into the bedroom and stripped off his uniform. He changed for the time

being into a pair of old GAA shorts and a plain brown t-shirt, and flopped through the muggy warmth onto his bed. It was too warm to garden, and his mind had been redirected. And he needed to do something about it. He could try ringing the station in Wexford, to ask if anything had been reported, but on the other hand wanted not to look like an incompetent small-time pen pusher who didn't know what was going on in his own patch. He could make his way up to the Hall and start asking questions, but then again, he was only currently fuelled by the words of a simple man; he needed Ama. He arched his back as he lay, staring up at the low therapeutically purple ceiling. Dirty clothes, bloody face. She claimed it happened at the Hall. And then started talking to herself. A *conversation* with herself. The nonsense possibility poked its head out through the mire of other might-be's, and demanded consideration. He dismissed it as readily as it licked his senses, stuttering his breath and coercing his heart to skip a beat. Not a chance of it. Not again. And that was the full extent of the attention he was giving to *that*.

He stretched his limbs tightly, and curled back into a heavy ball. There was bound to be something that he could have been doing, but it could wait until he had worked up a little bit of energy. Within minutes, he was slipping in and out of the kind of horrible light half-sleep he hated, the kind he would eventually sit up from, feeling sick and over-heated, and worse still, unable to get any kind of decent kip for hours to come.

*He too recognised the three youths along his path, and slotted names alongside faces with considerable more ease than Ama had; easier for him because he had done so professionally on a number of occasions, to say nothing of how they knew him when he removed his hat. Throughout the tenure of his relationship with the three young men, incorporating a timeline of crime that ranged from angry orchard-owners demanding unreasonable vengeance to the owners of cars scratched and bumped along their urban stock car routes, Sergeant Billy Ryan had bailed the tearaways out of trouble more times than either party dared to count. They weren't bad kids, just happened to stretch the limits of the law at times. Throwing their arms around and gesturing at each other, they seemed a little too agitated for the day that was in it. The sun would be soon teaching them uncomfortable lessons about how not to behave under its gassy majesty. Billy Ryan smiled to himself, his dimples creasing into bulbous cheeks and redirecting rivulets of perspiration. He wondered what scheme they were planning this time.*

*"Isn't it a little warm to be planning a crime wave, boys?"*

*They had been too preoccupied to notice him ambling towards them, and scowled in unison at the suggestion. Ordinarily, they would have denied anything and everything in short surly statements. Their distracted faces seemed to deserve another dig in passing. If they weren't in the mood for joking, he'd leave them be.*

*"What's wrong, cat got your tongues?"*

*The tallest one scratched his arm and spat, eyes scrunched against the brightness.*

*"Did you hear about Ama?"*

*Billy Ryan's normal reflex reaction would have been to curtly recommend that he be shown the respect he had earned, and addressed as "Sergeant" whenever they met him in his colours. But the mention of his next door neighbour was enough to allow him to step past the self-important pride momentarily. There was something within the black looks on three faces, and the fact that they were apparently linking it to Oleg's daughter that could only disturb him. He stopped walking.*

*"Ama? No, why?"*

*One of the other two bristled onto the tarmacadam podium.*

*"That fucking Yank. Giving her drink and drugs, and making videos".*

*Each word was injected with hate, prolonging vowels and bringing his accent further to the front. Billy Ryan did not understand him, and as a result was more mildly amused than anything else.*

*"What?"*

*"That American at the Hall. He's making sex videos, and got her drunk to be in one".*

*The third guy piped up, with no less vitriol. They now unequivocally had his full, aghast attention.*

*"She saw herself on a computer. Topless. He's making porn, and her face is all busted up".*

*Billy Ryan's heart sank into the depths of his stomach, where it was strangled and drowned in gut horror juices. The girl next door.*

*"She said there was cocaine, they tried to make her take some".*

*Drugs, pornography, and a busted face. Billy Ryan swallowed, and the seesaw mechanism dragged his pounding heart back up into his chest, where it wanted to simply say "no".*

*"We're fiending to go up to the Hall now, and learn him something he won't forget in a hurry".*

*The speaker pummelled his fist into his palm, spots of spittle on his lips. "Yeah".*

Sergeant Ryan was blinking rapidly at their faces, trying but failing to match the smile of the young woman who lived beside him with the visages of actors in films he'd seen on television, scenes depicting loosely what the three angry-eyed young men were telling him about. He couldn't do it because he couldn't believe it. And yet the sincerity and the clarity of passion in these three noble knights would be grossly misplaced had it not happened. They were not boys to fuck around with the truth, and this was hardly a laughing matter. He cleared his throat and spoke regardless, slowly and clearly, embracing the hint of certainty that presented itself. There was a distant cousin of the black rage opposite him beginning to bubble inside his own lungs.

"You go and do that".

Three jaws dropped in sequence, wondering if their ears had deceived them. If not, it was cartoon-time absurd, and it needed to be verified before they went any further.

"What?"

He lifted his eyes to catch one pair of the three; it didn't matter which.

"Maybe you should".

"Are you serious?"

He continued in the same dry, unsettling drone.

"The law will unofficially turn a blind eye to whatever you do".

"What?"

Three minds rotated the words thoroughly and carefully in their heads. They should have been reprimanded for wanting to take the law into their own hands. They should have been sold some shit about proper channels. Instead, they were being told to go and do as they wished, with the permission of the law. Three minds searched for the catch. The cop's face was strangely colourless, and without an expression that could be assuredly identified. When he spoke, it was only his mouth that moved.

"Tell me this, what are you feeling right now?"

There was silence as the three wondered if this was the catch coming for them. A regimental pin pricking a just balloon. The Sergeant in Billy Ryan lifted its head above their hesitation in answering.

"Did she herself tell you?"

An easier question.

"Yeah".

If she had said that it happened, it had happened. He had not known the girl to lie or even exaggerate in all the years he'd known her growing.

*"When?"*

*"Just a minute ago".*

*"Where did she go?"*

*"Home".*

*"Right. I am going to go check on her and her parents".*

*He correctly sensed their reluctance to move on as being a wordless repeat of one of the earlier questions. His face crawled into a grim real shrug, and his teeth ground themselves together; he was not thinking or speaking as he would normally, everything was instinctive and instant. And everything was clouded by the jigsaw that was unable to finish itself off for him.*

*"If what you're saying is true, if what she is saying is true, I am sick to my fucking stomach".*

*A small red car raced by them, those inside distracted by what looked like a heavy moment by the side of the road. Sergeant Billy Ryan rubbed his hands together, the accompanying actions to his words.*

*"I wipe my hands of it. Whatever happens is between you and him. It will be a couple of hours before I begin any formal proceedings. If you're gone by then, you're gone by then".*

*Fingernails dug into flesh as the three youths clenched their fists even tighter. Ever since the incident in the pub, they had as one wanted to impose themselves on the loudmouth American, and see if he was as hot and as cocky when faced with a beatdown in the name of respect. But now, not one of them was capable of remembering what their original gripe with the Yank had been. There was a matter of local honour at hand, an invasion of their village's privacy and decency, an act of war that could only be dealt with in an equally calculated militant strike. The bold choking lump-in-throat swelling in their bodies was probably an indication of just how important they were suddenly become. They were about to move in retaliation to the fouling of one of theirs. They were protecting the innocence and the honest truths of their people. Skinny chests were thrust forward, and watery mixes of hatred and determination were worn as helmets. The sour purple-faced cop might not have appreciated it, so all three resisted the temptation to click their heels and salute him sharply; they were an army. Instead, they jutted their chins in pride, and looked him up and down.*

*For the first time in his career, Sergeant Billy Ryan was not acting in a manner becoming of his rank, and he knew it. He justified himself irritably by rapping that he had never before had to face down the corruption of a teenage girl in his own village by a drug-crazed pornography king. He was behaving*

*professionally enough by not discarding his work clothes and going with the three boys to beat the shit out of the evil Yank himself. Jesus, if he got near him in his present shaking state, he would probably kill him with his bare hands and think very little of it. It was more than likely safer that he send the three young ones to do his job for him.*

*“Give him a fucking hiding, and something to think about”.*

*The three troops snapped away without a word, crossing the road and disappearing into the thick duvet of tress, familiar enough with the terrain to not need any guiding path, moving quickly to eliminate the possibility of Sergeant Billy Ryan calling them back and changing his mind, as once before they had scurried away at his behest, having been reprimanded but not unduly punished for beating on a German tourist under the old bridge four years earlier. The fourteen year old tourist had not endeared himself to any of the locals by lashing out repeatedly at Jessie, the village’s loveable border collie, who had only playfully attacked the garishly-clothed Kraut. When his equally obnoxious parents arrived with their bruised and battered angel to lodge a complaint, Sergeant Ryan gravely assured them that he had the matter in hand, and would be filing the necessary files.*

*Days later, he and the three boys and Jessie the border collie shared ice-creams and a laugh at the Germans’ expense in the dead heat of a stifled Tuesday. It was no big deal and certainly nothing unusual, just how things were done down their way.*

\* \* \* \* \*

As Ama stood under the steaming sprays of water, successfully wiping her skin clean of the cold, itching rash that had spread across her upper body, her wandering mind suggested tepidly and nightmarishly that maybe she was fortunate in being *able* to take a shower. That perhaps she had managed to escape before knowing anything more than the tip of an awful iceberg. She wondered backwards at the words she had used to implicate the events of her afternoon, and wondered how her audience had taken them. She could not settle upon a justification for the unsettled muttering that probed her to determine what it was about the three concerned boys that had been so unusual. But when it eventually came, two long hours later, it came hard.

**chapter seventeen**

Even through ten minutes of incredulous reconstruction and analysis, Malik and Sheila were unable to ascertain exactly what had happened in the mind of the recently departed Ama. Malik learned quickly that Sheila had not seen enough of his recording in detail, that she still believed that Ama's ultimate blushes had been spared by a bra or bikini top of some kind. At the risk of losing the remaining girl's favour, he did not correct her. They had another line each to calm their nerves, and at a loss to explain it, they abandoned trying, and began locking eyes a little more often than Sheila would have been comfortable with had she not been under an influence. She was sure that she recognised the suggestion in the older man's stare, and also the rising hormones in her own body that screamed to be heeded. Despite all this, and though they were chatting freely and easily, seated at the oak table in his huge kitchen, there was a persistent gnawing sound rubbing through her conscience. She hated the ashen face that she was seeing every time her mouth laughed at one of Malik's pokes at the frigid and frail nature of the girl she had been so much in awe of. Sheila didn't really consider herself to have committed any great crime against the weird local, but was a little put out by her over-reaction. So much so that it grew and roomed with the churning sensation in her stomach to form a team of sickness strings. She needed fresh breaths, and a break from the indulgences, and she needed to go clear the air with her tour guide friend. She was fiercely apologetic in making her excuses to leave, albeit only temporarily. Malik forced her to promise that she would return to the Hall once she had checked on Ama, a promise Sheila indeed had no qualms in making, considering her other options for the evening. She wisely figured that regardless of how Ama took her meek remorse, they would not be hugging, making up and meeting for drinks later that night. And in her current pumped state, poor Eoghan did not stand a chance of avoiding her wicked tongue, so she would do him a favour and stay away. Malik left in her in no doubts as to why he wanted her to come back, and what would be going down if and when she did. As her own insides gurgled and groaned in anticipation, Sheila smiled and put on her best seductive face to reply that she would have no problem with that.

Malik missed the feminine company just as soon as it had gone, but looked forward eagerly to its return. He busied and distracted himself by returning to his unbelievable new home video, and playing it through every single filter and option that the editing software offered in turn. He marvelled open-mouthed at having such a clear and vivid record of the occurrence, knowing that even without

the footage, it would have been a image he'd have retained for many years to come.

Having only once before heard the Hall's door chimes, and having been sizeably prepared to hear it that time around, he was for a moment baffled and struck stupid by the booming bells when they came. His first instinct was to hope that it was Sheila fizzing outside, running eagerly back to his proposed Caligulan evening of drugs and carnal pleasures. Had she satisfied her guilt that quickly, or simply dismissed the sheltered indignation of the mad waitress chick, favouring instead the opportunity to party with him? He almost skipped out into the corridor, and slid his way flat-footed up to the commanding entrance. Impatiently neglecting to award himself the advantage of using the peephole, he pulled the heavy door back, and was afforded the total and real surprise when greeted in stutters by two panting and wet-faced men. The coke sniggered, and something else sounded off about being scared by the surreal edge, but to Malik and his interrupted excitement, it was a definite and clear case of *what the fuck?*

He listened to their punchy short-breath story carefully, keeping his weight behind the door at all times and his hidden hand within reaching distance of the blade in case they tried anything sudden. To his quick mind, there were huge holes and gaps in their tale – discrepancies he gleefully but slightly nervously pointed out in time. How could they lose a car? Why would they choose to walk down the deserted wooded lane to the Hall instead of trying to flag down a passing motorist on the busier main road? Would it not have been easier to find help in the park they had been *playing* in? He was inwardly nervous because he was suspicious – they could have been reporters, or cops, or someone checking up on his surprise package from Ben, for all he knew. The paint on their clothing seemed to corroborate with their agenda, but costumes and disguises hung on the same branch as deception in his mind's possibility tree. As he threw more and more childish questions at them, their tempers frayed and spilled into angry and indignant reiterations of just how much this Kevin guy needed help. The nastier they got, the harder he laughed, until he began fretting that his convulsions were too strong and too paralysing to allow him successfully resist any last resort battering ram tactics that may have ensued. He was dangerously unaware of just how easily the two red-skinned unwanted guests were melting down minutes of horribly euphoric worry and jaded concern, and moulding the remnants into energetic distate and a barely suppressed need to overcome the wild-eyed and playful American; the strangely-clothed lord of the manor who was unbelievably mocking their plight.

If ever asked, Malik and Derek would have insisted that the pear-shaped rock came out of nowhere, tearing inconsiderably through the air and bringing a prompt and vicious end to the deteriorating negotiations. Aidan would never have the time or the mental capacity to wonder, knowing very little about it as the prehistoric missile struck almost clinically at the joint of parietal and occipital bones in his skull. Falling into an instant crimson unconsciousness, he slumped forward against the door, catching Malik off guard, and forcing him to retreat back into the hall. The projectile rolled off the fallen man's back, and bounced nonchalantly off the doorjam to join them indoors, amazingly not coloured by the steady thin stream of deep red that began to seep onto the carpet. Glancing down in paralytic shock at the crumpled mannequin by his feet, Malik could see the messy inhuman hollow that the rock had left behind, a stomach-turning blend of black hair, dirty white bone and something that was surely too dark to be blood. The sound of the impact was still ringing in his ears, an awful thud, like a distant muffled door slamming shut, too terrible to have involved a living creature. He reeled backwards, pulling his foot out from under Aidan's head, which came down heavily on the ground with a thump that sounded almost cheerful in comparison to its previous song. Apart from that one cowardly movement, Malik was left uselessly limp, only turning his head when a window somewhere in the closed room to his left smashed impressively under the demand of a second bombardment. It was a clean, sweet sound, by no means suited to the moment, and somehow as familiar to Malik as his own voice. The other paint-guy, the one with the fully-functional skull and his hands around his head was screaming at him, but Malik was hearing only a loop of the breaking glass in his cans. It reminded him of something, something apparently important enough to allow him take some seconds out in the middle of the strange rock onslaught, but he could not remember what. Another round cracked against the stone frame over the door and dropped to the cold marble outer porch floor with a weighty click, a crude Flintstone impression of snooker balls or marbles coming together. Derek shoved his huddled way past Malik into the inner sanctum, and pulled Aidan's rubber-like legs clear of the door's swing. Malik stood looking with the interested mull of a retard on his face as the active man kicked the door shut, two silent seconds before yet another rock bruised the wood on the other side. There was more shouting, and perhaps something from outside, but Malik was more interested in finding a name for the face he was seeing inside.

*"What the fuck is that?"*

Tough skin, almost a hockey-cut hair style, a hitchhiker. A bit like Jim Brady re-issue Gary Cole, but not quite. Paint-guy was pulling his arm and spitting

words, his face contorted and now looking down at the other guy who wasn't moving. Neither of them looked like his friend, who was now climbing a stile in a deserted badlands field, so it didn't matter.

"Aidan, AIDAN!! Jesus, *fuck!*"

Not Jesus. Not Thomas. *Tom*. No, Thomas, right first time.

"Thomas Veil".

There was another clatter outside, this time against the face of the house, and definitely voices. So at least the rocks weren't throwing themselves. The arresting fascination to which Malik had been handed over, the all-important need for him to recall that it was during an episode of the ill-fated TV series *Nowhere Man* he had first heard the sound of breaking glass used repeatedly and so effectively – it had flown away happily as quickly as it had arrived to nag. Leaving him as fresh and as alert to this new dilemma as a harbour-side barkeep to the arrival of naval marines on shore leave.

"*Who?*"

The standing man was patting distractedly at Malik's upper arm, still peering down at his friend but not willing to touch him, muttering religious curses and oaths of desperation. Another rock. Another window, maybe even the same one; the same room, at least. Malik wondered if he had been asleep. He was only barely grasping the situation. Someone throwing shit at his house. Strangers *in* his house. He stopped short of angrily linking them to whoever or whatever was battering his walls, because one of them was lying on his bloodied carpet, in a bad way. Unless *they* had brought this bullshit with them. With each passing millisecond came more energy, and more acidic rage.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?"

Derek looked up at him, massive panic in his eyes, and uncertainty in his unstable lips. He wanted to turn his friend's head, to hide the sickening dent from his own sight, but feared causing any extra damage, if that were possible.

"*How the fuck do I know? Someone's throwing rocks, look at his head!!*"

Like a dog, Malik could smell the fear and the weakness, and above his own, he sneered. He himself was confused, scared and maybe even a little pumped by the sudden attack, but he was not hysterical. His freed mind was now capable of computing the facts at a hugely efficient rate – some fuck was chucking rocks at his house; two guys – whether directly involved or not – had been caught in the crossfire, and inadvertently taken a serious hit. *His* house. He bunched his fingers into a stinging fist in answer, and slammed his teeth together. Derek shouted at him again, but Malik was already twisting the handle of the door to his right, and bundling into the study. So far, the missiles had managed to steer

clear of the windows at the front; they remained intact. He moved quickly up along the side of the room, keeping to the wall, and darting across behind the tall green bunched curtains. He pulled back enough musty material to give himself a crack view through the window, and saw them lined up across his open gate entrance.

Three figures, three thin males, all in black. His heart took to flipping like a suffocating fish, fear and white anger crying for attention. It was the three redneck assholes from the bar, the ones he had challenged, the ones who had caused his expulsion. The same three he would have had no hesitation in tackling on the street that night, with the bravado of his day's drinking and the security of his metalware behind him. Now, wired by everything that he had taken but equally sobered by the sound and the vision of the crushed skull in his hallway, he wasn't quite so confident. Even with the assistance of the remaining stranger, assistance he wasn't sure he could count on, he was outnumbered two to three. And they had rocks. He had only what they were throwing in. And even at that, he would have to open a door or something to get at them, leaving himself open. The pale-knuckle shaking crave to get out there and crack their fucking heads apart was soothed and smoothed over by sensibility; he was somehow and without warning in over his head. He winced and cringed violently as one more rock slammed into the wall inches from the window, and regained sufficient composure to begin to move away. He slid back into the hall to a barrage of shouts and needs from the conscious guy. Malik muttered something about getting the police out, and jogged down the corridor, his heart pounding. Derek screamed about an ambulance, and Malik shouted back his accordance. Once in the kitchen, his eyes strayed to the bag of coke on his counter, and he journaled his minutes instantly to queue using the phone, hiding what needed to be hidden, and sitting fucking tight until help arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sheila was in no great hurry to reach the other side of the forest; she figured that giving Ama an extra half an hour to cool off was only going to be to her own advantage when she got around to explaining her actions. She was equally unphased by the fact that her journey of apology meant having to negotiate tracks and lanes she herself had only walked for the first time that day. As far as she could remember, it was straight all the way along the beaten path, and then she was at the lane on which Ama lived. The number of the house wasn't quite so clear, but she banked lazily on being able to recognise it if she saw it. She pored and pawed over her eventual explanation as she dragged her

feet, falling short of anything besides the unusable truth – “the guy with the bag of coke offered me money to help him bone you” – and some throwaway but clever indication of just how differently city girls and country girls let their hair down – “I am so sorry, that’s just how we kick out the jams back home”. She could slide in a couple of fascinatingly strange and unusual phrases like that to confuse the naïve local, all the while assuring her that it was not personal, not sexual in nature, and certainly not meant to offend. Something playful stirred inside her, and she snorted in a most unladylike manner, happily feeling tasty dot traces tumbling down into the back of her mouth. What if she was to play the misguided heartfelt hand, admit in tears to having acted so foolishly and reprehensibly only when merry on vodka? Crudely announcing her crippling attraction towards the mysterious local and hoping that she would react favourably, only for it to backfire so grievously and at such personal distress to Ama. Sheila could lie about the video on the computer, insist that she had talked Malik into accepting the moral wrong of his recording, and watched as he reluctantly but justly deleted it from memory. Her quick and eager mind raced forward to the showdown in Ama’s bedroom, and played her a clapperboard clip of the freshly-enlightened girl stepping gingerly from her own closet to accept Sheila’s clumsy advances. In the soft silence of the siesta woods, the dawdling invader burst out laughing, the sudden sounds scaring small groups of dozing grebes and warblers, who leapt from their perches overhead into clusters of chattering feathers. She instantly dismissed the notion of fobbing her behaviour off on some dumb Dutch-couraged transient crush, realising that if Ama amazingly flipped the script on her like that, Sheila would be in very real danger of pissing on herself, through laughter or through sudden nervous fear.

She saw the black stick-man shapes against the white backdrop created by the sun in the gap at the faint far end of the woods, and thought of the round-faced youngster who had supervised her first few steps into the trees hours earlier. But even at the distance between her and them, these three movers were taller, and evidently not forbidden to wade into the sweetly pungent half-light. Two of them seemed to be swinging oddly shaped arms, and it was a full further minute before they were near enough for her to see their faces, and the two knotted cylindrical lengths of wood. Although at three slightly different heights, they were dressed similarly and sketchily, and were obviously patrons of the same low-budget barber, and Sheila was hugely amused. She was positively brimming with emotions – excitement at the evening of excess that lay ahead, a tinge of nervousness about the showdown with Ama, and all the giggling touches that remained from the powder. She racked her brain for something quick and

smart to say to the farmboy Fonzies, something sufficiently over their heads to allow her avoid a full confrontation, but still provide her comedy hit. They were now close enough for her to hear on the ground, and smell on the air. The seedling joke that formed in her mouth was held comfortably at arm's length by the six freezing eyes that bore into her soul, six commandingly hypnotic white ovals she flickered hastily between. She heard her name whispered by a sudden breeze, and yet not one of the thin mouths moved. The three expressionless faces stopped in a line across her path, and Sheila knew a fear she had never known before. The guy in the middle – the tallest – stepped forward, and drew back his right arm slowly. Sheila swallowed and waited, unable to move or nervously question their motives. The punch was full and true, unfiltered by gender softenings, and seemed to connect with the absolute length of her face. She felt it on the base of her forehead, in the vertices of her nose, on her chin and in the maxillas of her cheeks. She felt the explosions of flesh, the splitting of her lips, and the rough intrusion of knuckles against the jelly of both eyes. Her legs wobbled and shook somewhere beneath her; she was looking up towards the interlocked branches at the roof of the forest, clamps of darkness hiding the blue sky as her head snapped back on its base. Her balance disappeared somewhere in the echo of the blow in her ears, and she fell, rolling as she went, spinning painlessly down the small clay rise. She deflected at pace off a disapproving ash, and came to a rest on a hastily arranged bed of ferns. As soon as she had settled, on her side with her back to the punching man, bright green fronds initially displaced by her roll began cautiously returning to their original upright positions, curious to see what all the fuss was about. She would have felt them sneaking up against the bare skin of her arms had she not been paralysed from the neck down, open-mouthed and broken. The wild plants continued to slowly creep back up around her, worried for their friends on whom she still lay, and effectively shielding her from the eyes back out on the track. Her own eyes remained wide and open and swelling, peering away without focus into darkness.

## chapter eighteen

If he had not still been dozing, if he had been allocated a few woken minutes within which to consider what he had heard that afternoon and what he had seen in the nauseating daydream, Sergeant Billy would have been expecting the phonecall. He couldn't have confidently predicted the identity of the caller, or to what extent the outcome had been forced, but he would have been pretty sure that something was coming. As it was, when alerted, he shoved himself off the bed with his best impression of a man who hadn't just been asleep, feeling dizzy and pushing inwardly on his churning stomach. His wife laughed at the charade, knowing damn well that her husband had been stealing a few quick minutes before tea, and adding that the man ringing in the emergency sounded like an American. He ran past her into the back hall, and took the old black receiver from where it lay on the telephone trolley and pressed it to his face. His voice was groggy and thick, and his breath stank of pungent sleep as it deflected off the mouthpiece.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, is that the police?"

The American sounded breathless and panicky, and Billy struggled for a moment before recognising the voice. The recollection spurred him to remember the dream, and he lost himself briefly in a quick dash through the details, and a twinge of apprehensive pain. His voice continued the call, but adopted a tone approaching distraction.

"Yes, this is Sergeant Ryan".

"Good. Uh, there's something going down at my house. Some guys are throwing rocks, my windows are broken. And there's a guy been hit".

"I see".

Truthfully, he didn't. He was playing back the images of the dream, and the words of Loughie. He was forming a grossly exaggerated photofit of the girl supposedly injured in a fall up by the Hall. He wished bitterly that he had seen her himself, that he had heard her story first-hand. What he was going on right now shouldn't have borne thinking about, but little fragments of stained glass were beginning to drop from great heights, and there was an awfully familiar picture forming, the reworking of an old storyline with new characters.

"Can you get somebody out here, do something about this?"

He ignored the wavy voice in his ear, and peered out the side window for no reason at all. Apart from moving to refuse to admit numbly that he had figured it out already, that even the vague and threadlike arrows of contention

were enough to be real and accurate. That the possibility he had rejected as explanation for *another* daft happening that day was jutting out sweetly like a freshly-opened Patsy Pop from its wrapper, tut-tutting its orange tip at him for ignoring it a little earlier.

“Mmmm?”

“What?”

“What’s that you say?”

The Yank paused to allow indignation a shot.

“Did you not hear me? My house is under *attack*. Can you send someone out?”

Billy began chewing on the inside of his mouth.

“Where are you?”

There was a breathy sigh of relief of kinds.

“I’m at Arlton Hall”.

“Right. And can you see the guys who are throwing things?”

All the while, he was kneading and squeezing his memory, asking for the sarcastic phrase he had been on the end of the day before. Something about acting and not giving a fuck. *Do you want me to act like I give a fuck?* No, that wasn’t it. If he could find it, would he ever have a better time to return it to sender with such interest? He was sure he could easily titrate the knots in his gut into sarcasm.

“Yeah. I’ve seen them before, they’re all short-haired, dressed in black”.

“I see”.

So he had seen them before...so they knew him. It wasn’t just in a stupid daytime dream that they knew of him.

His demeanour barely changed at all in making the confirmation, that it was probably in the process of happening again. The first couple of times, it had been a different matter, but now, he was something of an old hand at it. Once, twice, three times a veteran. Knowing exactly what he had to do, and thinking only of how to do it. He would no more be choked by the dormant pools of suppressed sorrow that had threatened to ruin everything when it first began.

“Look, I’m gonna need an ambulance too, and quick”.

“Right you are”.

Had they been watching him? Had this been planned, or was it really as spontaneous and as reactive as was being suggested to him?

It dawned on Billy with garlic irony that he had on his phone a line of questioning second only to Ama being there with him. He smiled crookedly at the thought of the troubled American lying and sticking on the accusations that were

to follow, one eye on denial and the other on the tribal barrage of rocks being thrown at his guilty walls.

"Tell me, are you familiar with a girl in the village by the name of Ama?"

Malik was too dumbfounded by the tangential change of subject to object or return to hammering home the seriousness of his raider situation.

"Ama? No, why?"

The thoughtful policeman wasn't surprised by the lie.

"Are you sure? I have it on good authority that she was at your home earlier this afternoon".

He could have sworn he heard a swallowing sound at the other end.

And then a quavering sigh.

"No, I think you're mistaken".

*My boys don't make mistakes.*

"Am I? Well, we'll see about that".

"What?"

"We'll sort all that out later".

Another long pause, and some more nervous breathing. From them both.

"Look, are you gonna get some help out here for me? These guys are crazy. Come on!"

*If they're crazy, it's because they've been made crazy.*

"Sure. I'm sending a car up now. You just sit tight and don't do anything stupid".

The loudest intonation of relief yet.

"Thanks, man, thanks".

"Goodbye now, sir".

Billy pressed down on the receiver buttons to end the call with his words, and not the American's. He replaced the handset, and trotted into the kitchen, where he sat down to a hot bowl of stewed rhubarb, and bran-smothered brown scones. His wife asked dutifully about the telephone conversation, and was told that it was nothing, probably a hoax of some kind, but one that he would check out after his tea, when he was good and ready. As ever, she read what he gave her to read.

After a long and leisurely-paced meal, Billy announced that he was going to go and see if the American had sorted himself out. His mind had been scheming as he ate, and the net result allowed him to lie to his wife, telling her that the caller had been another pesky tourist, exaggerating about a tangle with a farmer on the far side of town. Some crap about wanting to pitch tents and being

warded off with a shotgun. It was safer to base his fictional response on the other side of the village, far away from where he was really heading towards, and far away from anything that could go wrong. He made sure that Sally was busy submerging crockery in the kitchen before he left, and scurried across the road into the cover of the trees, looking up and down the lane for anyone else who might recognise him. His nifty clean-up operations brought with them a level of stealth and secrecy he had never bothered with in all his years of police service. This was an entirely different field sport. His feet *needed* to be light and invisible, and he *needed* to employ an element of guile and cunning to cover himself and those who now cared not if they were covered. Each and every time, they were more and more careless, never around to hear him cry that if he wasn't there to dust away their doings, the village would be split open and scoured. He had no doubt that one finding would bring with it a domino reaction, sores and scabs peeled back as the souls of the wronged escaped to scream and point to one common implication in all their tales : Billy himself. He dodged trees as he skulked through them, swinging himself by hugging trunks one-handed, punished at times by gluey secretions of sap. Justifying his actions was as easy and as sketchy as ever; he had been blinded firstly and most importantly by the collusion of pain, joy, sorrow and loss, and acted only and impulsively without halting to think, to protect the names of his dead boys, perverting a course of justice that in time he would have to grow to have no problem screwing with. At the time, they were unable to protect themselves, and driven by the puncture of elated disbelief in his grief, Billy had done what any man would have done in his place. Months later, riddled by guilt and the return of his pain, he realised the horrible error of his way. He realised the life that faced him if he chose not to live alone with his terrible secret. And then when they came again, his heart shattered in understanding that he would have to do it again, to ensure that his first disgrace could never be referenced. He was held down and forced once more to cater for their judgement and their actions, their vigilante ideals of honour and protection, interference that had probably never even been asked of them.

Billy was a religious man, but soon found himself pulling free of accompanying his wife to the eleven o'clock sermon on Sunday mornings, telling her that he preferred a refreshing early morning spin into Wexford, where he would attend the Capuchin chapel mass. And while Sally was enjoying her only lie-in of the week, marvelling at how her husband could give up his, he would be driving a couple of miles down the coast and sitting in his car, looking out on a sea that turned with the weather, and praying silently for the strength to get through another week pretending that nothing was wrong.

**chapter nineteen**

Even though he had veered at an appropriate angle through the densest part of the forest, Billy still came out above the Hall, surprised to see the warmth of the red bricks through cracks in the wooden pillars. It struck him that maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to approach from the side, or even from the back – not that he expected to meet anybody else at that time, but he was too old and wise to take anything for granted. The forest wasn't exactly a tourist haven – the damage done by the discovery of a decomposed itinerant in '98 had never really been repaired by the locals. It had been Sergeant Billy's second body, his second sickening mop-up, considerably less successful than the first one or the debacle that followed, but still good enough to rule out anything more than a basic investigation, and a casebook that still remained open but hardly worried over. Sufficient time had passed between the disappearance of the thirty year old – who was on the run from an allegation of armed robbery at the hotel – and the surfacing of his corpse to render useless any leads or links that the team from Wexford could sniff out. The body would have remained in its wet soil grave had a sizeable portion of the Púca's Stream's banks not fallen in, exposing enough of a rotten finger for some bastard dog to go excavating. His horrified lady owner ensured that Billy himself was next on the scene, handling the discovery with an unphased sense of jobworthy detachment, but cursing himself in fear for choosing a midnight plot so near to the crumbling banks.

He tried the back gate of the Hall, and found it locked, so he crept slowly and quietly around the side to the front entrance. There was a deathly silence clinging to the walls, broken only by the occasional crash of a wave away on the cliff, and the calls of a gannet circling him, suspicious of the movements of the oddly-dressed man below. Billy ghosted through the open gates, immediately noticing the broken windows, dark abscesses beside the untouched glass panes that were orange and dull, reflecting the evening sun. He walked softly to the front door, which was discoloured and disfigured, undoubtedly by the thralls of smooth rocks that rested in a vicious circle around the porch, big bullying brothers to the millions of tiny pebbles that gave the driveway its crunch. The door remained shut, and was too heavy to have been forced open. None of the windows were sufficiently butchered to allow a grown male free access, although he wasn't sure exactly how *they* would be bothered by the razor cuts of new glass. He followed the tight paved path around to the back garden, and walked quickly across the wide patio area. From the side, he could see the white of the garden furniture where it lay awkwardly inside the kitchen. He reached the sliding doors, and saw

that the oval table had been thrown through the sheet window, smashing it completely, leaving a space through which any man could move, a gap bigger than had the door been opened in its conventional way. His feet bit down on the kitchen's fresh covering of light green glassy fragments, and he stepped carefully around the fallen table. He wanted to call out, but knew in his sunken heart that it was futile. Unnecessary. How could the dead hear him? They had never listened before.

He quickly determined that the kitchen was deserted, with no signs of struggle or altercation apart from the battering that the door had taken. Billy moved out into the corridor, a little nervous through uncertainty of his surroundings, and also by the framed pictures that lay scattered along the hallway, and the growing inevitability. The house was incredibly quiet, and smelled of old fabric. There was a short walkway leading to a toilet room on his left, but from where he was, with its door swung open, he could see that there was nothing to concern him down there. He edged up towards the next room, again on his left, and pushed open the groaning door with the tip of his finger. A small, tastefully furnished dining room with a large table in the middle taking up most of the available space, and not a lot else, so he pulled back his sweating head. The door directly opposite that one was locked, with no hint of a key, but the next one along on the left bore considerably more authentic fruit. It had evidently been used as some kind of equipment room; there were strange pieces of broken gadgetry strewn about the floor and tables, wires and expensive-looking innards hanging limply from them, and guitar amplifiers overturned and leaning wearily against walls and each other. The centrepiece of the destruction was the slightly-charred remains of a computer, its original white and Caribbean blue shades now smoked in places to a light brown. There was the acrid stench of an electrical fire in the room, but no other suggestions of life. The screen of the computer monitor had been cracked, spidered but not caved in, unlike the casing around it, fractured panels of protective plastic.

Billy returned to the breathless silence of the corridor, and tried a further two locked doors before reaching the inside of the front porch. His heart leapt into his mouth at the sight of the small and neat puddle of blood on the carpet. Darker and deeper than the shades of the ground, in the stiff light it was almost black in colour, but human to him. And the first true sign of their influence – not that the crude but effectual forced entry hadn't meant anything, but he wasn't here to tidy up the house after them. He covered the entire building in under five minutes, trying the rooms that were open to him, not bothering with any

of the locked doors because he was sure that they wouldn't have either. He could find nothing more to work with, nothing to suggest that anyone had been upstairs – just a basic bedroom and bathroom coupling. And no further indication as to who was bleeding, and where they had gone to. Walking so quietly and so apprehensively through the grand Hall made Billy feel more nervous than he had been in years; this was *different*. He headed back towards the kitchen, and out into the garden. He stood at the edge of the terrace with his hands on his hips, looking more assured than he felt. What were they at this time? What had they done? Why did this one have to be different, why did they have to make things more difficult for him? Something squawked in the woodland heights behind the wall at the bottom of the garden, and his mind followed his eyes and ears in succession. Had they taken him into the woods? Were they doing Billy's job for him? Was he needed at all that stuffy dumpy evening?

And then his eyes fell on the locked gates in the right-hand corner. They hadn't gone through those gates. Even to suggest that they had done so, and locked the swinging rungs behind them was to award them a level of thought and intelligence they were far from deserving of. Why would they act so carelessly and wantonly inside the Hall and then worry about a rusty old gate?

A seagull screamed at him from somewhere out at sea, and again he turned to catch it. The bird dived suddenly, and disappeared down behind the perimeter wall along the left side of the cultured garden. About halfway along that wall there was a wooden door, neither heavy nor strong, slices of pale light coming and going as it scraped along the brick frame, coaxed into opening fully by the hot breeze, but never achieving. As the thin door half-opened and closed on itself, it seemed to be speaking dumbly, the same repetitive rotated and wordless goldfish mantras, a call that could nevertheless not be ignored. Billy walked down the flight of granite steps onto the manicured lawn, and pattered uncontrollably towards the secret garden's portal, the green-stained door that appeared to have calmed itself down as soon as it saw the newest guest giving it his full attention.

Billy pushed, and the door creaked out and away from the garden. The small but sturdy locking bolt had been left unshot – either an unintentional calling card, or boorish directions left for him. He stepped through the wall, and out onto a grassy clifftop clearing, a small naked piece of land that seemed to leak out from under the compound of the Hall's grounds before slithering over the side into the sea. Where he stood, the edge of the cliff was a good three metres away, but the land bent itself towards the brick walls on his left, getting to within reaching

distance, its job finished off by a corroded metal pallet. The brownish red sheet effectively cut the private seaview balcony off from the prying eyes and noses of anybody hoping to poke their heads around the side of the outer walls at the front. Billy himself realised that he had never had the need nor the desire to negotiate the cliff side of the estate, or even seen anything of the arrangement from any of his excursions at sea. To his right, the land again came back towards the walls, this time policed by the hood of tall ash trees. Some of the more foolhardy timbers had edged themselves a little too near to the lip of the cove, and a handful were leaning dramatically over the hungry rocks, their roots and balance disturbed by erosion and time. The sea was calling and goading, daring the trees to jump, and daring Billy to *come and have a look*.

His feet took him towards the hanging trees, their lanky arms stretching out across the headland like any of a thousand cranes on a thousand city building sites, reaching desperately for their brethren growing on distant shores. He kept unnecessarily close to the walls as he stepped carefully along the sunbaked grass. The first of the trees was dead, laying at a slightly more advanced angle than the others, leafless and dry, bony to the touch. Billy steadied himself at the edge of the cliff by slapping the palm of his hand to the thickest branch on offer, the one least likely to crack and splinter under his weight. He peered out and downwards, the dropping of his head bringing his eyes through darkening blue waves, champagne white foam, and the grey and green gnashing teeth of the vicious rocks. And there, crumpled on the gaping mouth of the sea, maybe a hundred feet below, were the bodies. *Three* bodies. One as black and as white as Billy had been gruesomely expecting – the American, and lying around him in accidental paeans of worship were two more men, clothed differently, but sharing his end with him. They wore strange garments, dotted brightly in places by red and blue, the happy colours nervous beside the joyless greyscales of the rocks and the awkward twists of their limbs. Billy could feel the thudding of his chest in his hand as it pulsed against the tired wood of his tree. *Three* bodies, one more than ever before, already soaked and slimy as the waves skipped up to embrace them. He had never been asked to deal with three before. How could he deal with three? Panic began to sneak like ivy around his neck, and he took a step backwards for fear of falling and joining their lifeless party. The sea crashed and roared with a little more venom than he had heard in the minutes he'd been there. His eyes returned to the carnage, and the sheets of bubbles and seaweed that crept like reptiles back over the still human shapes. It was cold out on the cliff, degrees colder than inside the warmth of the protective red walls, and Billy shivered. Was the blue wilderness speaking to him, offering its tuppence worth to

his abhorrent task planning? Would the coming tide be enough to take the new dark secret away from him? Could he trust the playful waters to hold the bodies in its salty grasp, hold them until they were decayed enough to pervert whatever course of investigation followed? Would the three corpses wash up further along the coast in time for them to be identified and linked retrospectively? There was a crippling quiver in Billy's breath as he sighed. And then the sea sighed, as though truly hurt by the lack of faith.

The worst they had loaded him with so far had been two in number, two city boys who had burned Old Man Foran's barn to the ground in the midsts of a careless permission-free drugged-up squatting escapade. Their bodies were never found, and the authorities scratched their heads in insisting that the heat of the fire shouldn't have been sufficient to incinerate the careless sleepers without trace. Billy knew better, and knew that the two tragic fools lay side by side in a small cave about twelve miles down the coast, the quickest and the best he could have achieved under the extreme circumstances. At least they weren't still hanging by their necks from the beam of a two-metre height restriction barrier in the car park just past Lendry Cove. It was to this windy and howling Golgotha that the whispers pulled Billy that night when he had done all he could at the cinderling farmyard. His horror was genuine and fixed deep in the pits of his soul, but interrupted by a growingly familiar sour acceptance. He worked quickly and terribly, cutting the strangled teenagers down and fitting them easily into the trunk of his car, all the while sweating and cursing cathartically and failing to believe that he would get away with it this time. The wolfish cackles on the gales did nothing to assure him, and he would never be sure whether it was by divine or demonic inspiration that he was pointed towards the caves. They were desolate and hidden enough to dissuade most would-be invaders, but he piled the limp young men high with rocks and handfuls of sand, obscuring them from all but the nosiest explorer. Billy then drove aimlessly for an hour, praying and begging for the colour to return to his face and to his heart.

He wondered frantically if he had time to get down onto the rocks in order to weight the bodies before the waters took them on their funeral swim. The cliff face was sheer and unsafe, and all around him the tide was getting more restless. He predicted a rough thirty minutes before the three men were submerged and finally prey to slipping away into the sea. And then began the real uncertainty – where were they going to come up? On the beach in the village? In one of the tourist towns nearer Wexford? Or would they come back to Arlton Cliffs, dashing off the base as the Hall was overrun by outsiders looking for the

American? Was there any point in hoping that the bodies would sink to the sea bed and remain there without his assistance? He concluded sadly that it was too risky to even look into venturing down to their level. And making his way back into Dunfarring to commandeer a boat brought with a whole new world of shit; lies and links.

He found that he couldn't take his eyes from the two unknowns, as though he was sure that recognition would fall if he continued to stare at their closed faces. Who were they, and how were they involved? Why were they dressed like that? The gentle noises surrounding him tickled his ears with suggestions. Maybe they were associates of the American, wrapped up in whatever it was that had earned the judicial wrath. And considering where and how they currently lay, *they* wouldn't be confessing to their crime. Was Ama really involved in it? What light could she shed on the prior proceedings?

His brain clicked quickly to process the new wrong sound, and sharply advised him to insist that he had been hearing things. It *wasn't* a car's horn sounding off, the cheeky beep of a roadrunner. There *wasn't* a car asking questions of the Hall as he stood outside, a sweaty sentinel over three broken criminals, waiting for them to wash away. The denial was thin, and unable to prevent his heart from sinking deeper and finding pace again. He practically ran to the brick doorframe, and cuddled against it with his back. He cocked his head around the corner cautiously, fearful yet of being discovered before he knew what he was doing. As he moved into a position from which he could see the gates at the bottom of the garden, the sound of a car door slamming shut carried through on stiller air, confirming the arrival and forcing Billy to jerk back behind the wall. Unable to believe just how bad this one was getting.

He waited with his spine to the wall, gasping heavily for breath, and listening intently. Inches from resignation, he was terrified of what waited. He had no idea who had pulled up at the back gates, or of what their interest might be. Any plans he could have formed with regard to *tidying up* were now truly fucked. He was now sure that the swell of the tide was not going to be enough to dispose of the dead. His input was needed, but now jeopardised by the coming of someone else. If they knew enough to leave the locked back gates and try the front entrance, they would see the damage done to the windows, and either run knowingly for their lives or stick around to investigate. Consequently, they would travel to the rear of the house, and just as he had, find their way through the

garden door out onto the seagull shit-specked ledge. To join him in standing high above the makeshift graveyard. He was trapped.

The options came thickly and reluctantly, as though smothered in drying cement or treacle. He could run. He could try and vault the rusted barrier, or mingle with the trees at the opposite end, but then he began jogging frantically with the risk of being caught, and caught as an officer of the law running from a crime scene. He could stay, and fool anybody who came upon him into believing that he was the horrified local policeman, first on the scene as always, abhorred by whatever it was that had happened in his sleepy jurisdiction. It could have been murder, an accident, suicide, anything. And although that brought with it the need to explain why he had been visiting the Hall in the first place, it was with this choice he went. He could after all tell the truth, he had been responding to a call made by an American some time earlier, his wife was an alibi to that. But also to the fact that Sergeant Billy Ryan had sat down to a warm and relaxed meal before seeing fit to investigate the call.

As he summoned the courage to move back into the walled garden, to at least be able to warn the newcomers custodially of the situation beneath them, he offered a quick prayer. More for his own safe and blameless delivery from the claustrophobic development than anything else. Amazingly, he did not pause to consider any potential for danger, if his presence there might have been threatening to the new arrival or arrivals, and ultimately expendable. If he had managed to worry that maybe the entity responsible for the three dead men was returning, he would have fled away into the woods without hesitation.

He glanced around the corner of the wooden door, and saw the two men making their way cautiously into the back kitchen. From that distance, and seeing only the backs of their figures as they moved, he didn't recognise either. He stayed where he was, hidden by the wall, and watched as they disappeared into the relative darkness of the house. The rear half of the Hall was cloaked in shade, casting a long and bad-tempered shadow onto the greens of the lawn. A choir of birds burst into a tuneless rendition somewhere in amongst the trees looking down at the foot of the garden. Billy's crayon plan changed direction, and asked him instead to keep out of sight, to see if the two housecallers would leave without thinking to go through the grounds. Then, with the coast sufficiently clear, Billy himself would split, leaving the sea to do what she would with the bodies. If they were found, they were found. But if he could clutch at any hope of *somebody else* having to deal initially with the find, he was going to do so. He wanted to

leave the clamouring smells and sounds of that place behind him. He had no interest in the standard procedures and protocols he faced if he was to tackle the lawful logistics. If he had any of his police piecements with him, he would have tossed them over the side into the churning foam beneath.

*Three days later, he would be back standing on the edge of that same cliff, his face drenched by swirling mist and rain, and the wind promising to tug him from his perch if he dropped his guard. It had taken Ama three days to give in to her mother's constant examinations of her mood, and a further ten minutes before the two of them were next door in Billy's sitting room. He took Ama away on her own to take something of a formal statement, unable to once look her in the eye, finding fierce interest instead in his paperwork. When she had left, he had the sober foresight to call in reinforcements from outside, just in case. They came and found the wet Hall in the same state of forced entry, and found the bodies where they still lay on the rocks, whipped by an agitated sea. The same sea that had promised to do so much, but actually did so little. The outsiders called back to base, and kick-started the biggest murder investigation the county had ever seen. Leaving Billy out of his depth, and free to slink back into a world of numb and blunt despair, goutts of self-pity addressed only by the detectives who came to him over time, probing him uselessly for anything at all he might know. It was easy for them to assume that the local man's broken heart façade was sourced in the horrible tragedy of such a happening in his sleepy seaside village.*

The three boys seemed to glide theatrically out from the darkest depths of shadow, and came to a rest behind the stone railing at the edge of the stone patio. They stood in order of height – Fergus, Donal and Mark, all dressed in a grey that touched on being black. Their faces were fixed and resolute, with stripes of pride, cruelty and focus. Their hair was as one and always tight to the bones of their skulls, and their hands were curved into fists by their sides. The sudden surge in Billy's chest was enough to cause him to lose his balance against the wall, and he stumbled, clutching at his heart as he went. The pain was white and spread like a spider's legs throughout his organs, graciously deflecting the torrential squall of emotions that promised to take him. He crashed back against the bricks, unable to take his eyes from the shimmering shapes equally fixed on him. He thumped despairingly on his heart as it coughed and spluttered, an old petrol engine needing a jump start. As it kicked back against his hand in response, he felt the tendrils of fire break off and dissolve into nothing. He steadied himself wheezingly, and could do nothing as the waiting clouds of hurt and fear descended upon his body.

He had never seen them before. He had heard them speaking through the wind, the sea and the trees, and he had felt them hoarding over his shoulders, and he had woken sweating after speaking to them in his nightmares, but he had never seen them. And while the disturbingly quiet and vacant visual before his eyes was nothing he couldn't have drawn if he had ever settled down with a pencil, paper and his thoughts, it was unexpected enough to terrify. Their frozen eyes spoke for five years of silence, and spoke of nothing more than blame.

The voice seemed to curl around his head before finding his ears. It wasn't one of theirs, and not one of the three mouths moved. It was a whisper, but treated through enough distortions and swells of the miserable breeze to be inhuman. And tangled up somewhere inside it was the taint of humour. It blared in his head, and only in his head.

*No witness.*

Billy didn't understand in time to stop himself from glancing wide-eyed from one blurred face to the next. As he shook his head, he could see all three of them as the voice repeated itself, no trace of annoyance or irritation with having to do so.

*No witness.*

It was systematically the gentlest and the firmest sound he had ever heard. He was paralysed by uncertainty and by the pangs of sorrow that clawed at his throat. He looked past them, hoping to see the two guys coming back out from inside the house. They too would see what he was seeing, they could lessen his trauma by sharing it. But he could see nothing. The garden had adopted a sudden chill, and he felt cold. In the twisted shade, the rear wing of the Hall seemed to be frowning, bearing down on something or someone in its vicinity with trembling rage.

Through his expectant scan of the kitchen, and through a third blank utterance of the words, Billy fell upon what they were asking him to do.

Six cold eyes were blaming him, and laying out the next step in their revenge. They blamed him for the high-speed car chase along the black country lanes five years before. They blamed him for pursuing the drunken joyrider, driving him towards the beach at Druid's Bath, where the three teenagers were polishing off their own forbidden drinking session. And even though it was the Astra in front that ploughed down the homeward-bound miscreants, they were blaming the fat man in the white Sierra behind. They were blaming their own heartbroken adoptive father, a man who had taken them and reared them as though they were his own. They held him responsible for the pruning of their lives,

and they were staying around to let him know. They came to him at night, slashing through his sleep. They laid their first murderous trap, and in the process morphed into ruthless protectors of the village they knew as home. They judged and passed sentence on those unfortunate or foolish enough to wrong the inhabitants, no longer governed by laws or rules. As the intended by-product of their ghostly iron fists, Sergeant Billy Ryan was left to clean up after them, duped by the moment into hiding their first indiscretion, and realising from then on that he *had* to keep going in order to protect himself.

And they were no longer content to watch his daily misery and torment as he wriggled with the poles of his awful secrets. Now they wanted *all* his guilt. They wanted the two guys taken from inside the house, they wanted to see them thrown to join the three on the rocks, and they wanted Billy to do it.

*No witness.*

He cared little for the hauntings that would continue and the investigation that would surely follow. He cared even less for the two men who remained somewhere in the depths of the burning-coloured Hall. He only thought of his present self as he ran back out onto the aerated ledge. *No, my hands are dirty.* He ran from the soulless visuals of his dead boys, who in death had turned on him so wrongly. Something about King Lear and serpents teeth and children going bad. He reached the slipshod old barrier and pulled himself up and over it. His upper body strength was pathetic, but the corroded iron gave his scrambling feet enough traction to allow him an ungainly advantage. He landed on the open side heavily, and grunted as pins began shooting upwards from his right ankle. It was not going to be enough to slow him as he broke into a jellied jog. He circled around and trotted backwards until he reached the mouth of the forest, terrified eyes half-expecting to see them mist through the outer walls, unblinking faces locked on evil persuasion.

But nothing came.

The fiery bricks of the old house seemed to be sulking in the sunny glow of evening. The windows appeared to be closed pouting eyes, and the walls could well have been crossly folded arms. The sun had given up on heating the world to an unpleasantly warm state, and now seemed content to piss everybody off by soaking them in a blinding orange glare.

## chapter twenty

For the second time that day, Alicia woke groggily with the hurriless ease of a sloth, and wondered where she was. Slowly, the distinguishing features of her small hotel room began pushing buttons, and she remembered. And then she remembered some more.

“Shit!”

She looked at her watch, and almost cried out. Her body moaned about the time zones she had put it through so recently, but she crawled off the bed, ignoring the pains. She grabbed her room key from the dresser, and the scrap of paper on which the receptionist had helpfully scribbled Ama’s home phone number. Fifteen seconds later she was in the lobby, wasting three pound coins on the payphone before a kindly passer-by pointed out that the machine wouldn’t accept them.

The smaller denominations in her fist made no difference; Alicia wasn’t to know, but at the other end, Ama was unable to hear the phone ringing, her world drowned by the distractive sounds coming from the stereo speakers in her room.

Driven by the hormonal high of her exhaustion, and by the no-hope-no-fear approach she felt rising as her plans disintegrated into mulch, Alicia went back to the receptionist. She had helped her out earlier that afternoon, confirming that Ama did work there, but had finished for the day. Alicia then asked for a contact number for her pen-pal, and was furnished with one. She called, and was answered by a woman who identified herself as being Ama’s mother. Alicia chirped that she was her daughter’s pen-pal from the States, over on a visit, to which surprise was expressed. It materialised that Ama had not received any letter from her American pen-pal during the preceding week, and was definitely not expecting her arrival. Or at least had not said anything to that effect to her mother, as would have been the norm. If anything, Mrs. Yutsnyev knew of how her daughter had tired of the younger and fiercely immature American, and saw their occasional email correspondence as more of a chore than anything else. Alicia learned that Ama had gone out for the moment with a friend, but would return sometime that afternoon. Happier for knowing this much, the tired traveller went about booking a small room, and retired to her chamber for a wash and what became a three hour plus nap.

She shyly asked the girl at the desk if she knew anything of an American musician in the village, and where he might be staying. Unbelievably, Sharon was able to tell her where he was staying, and how to get there. Alicia thanked her as profusely as her timetable would permit, raced out into the street, and looked along the narrow tidy unmarked road that would lead her right to the mouth of the forest. She had walked past it once already without knowing, and now she could afford to laugh at that. Now she was picking up the pieces of her epic struggled journey, and putting them back together.

The smoky cover of the woods unsettled her, and she found herself walking at the pace of the strange Olympic competitors. There were chattering sounds and bird-screams, and about half-way through, the cracks and snaps of something large breaking through the trees deep to her right. To her relief, it seemed to be moving away from her. Her eyes were peeled as she pounded the forest floor, watchful, and she saw the flash of bright yellow fabric in amongst the dull greeny brown. Clothing of some kind. She shivered to think of how or why it might have been discarded; this didn't strike her as being a place for courting lovers to be shedding each other's clothes. Behind the skittish ferns, the yellow seemed to move, and she allowed the panic wash thickly over her before cleverly insisting that it was a trick of the light. The branches continued to splinter away behind her, and she shook her mind free of the awful thought of having to confess to everything to her mother when she returned home, in order to summon forth the sympathy she would need after being attacked in this earthy tunnel.

She reached the Hall and trotted through the gates, all her wild and fantastic plans paused on the Discman of her mind. All but one of the downstairs windows were broken, and tell-tale chunks of rock were scattered along the ground underneath. At the same time, the house seemed ruined, but recently lived in. She could see the lace curtains and the furniture behind them. The door was pock-marked, like a wooden version of her Phys. Ed. teacher's cheeks, and more granite incriminations lay settled on the steps. There was no answer to either of her prolonged jabs at the doorbell. Despite herself and the horrible dry silence, she slipped around the side and across the back landing. Gulls screeched at her as they circled high above the garden. She could see a blue jeep parked at the gate in the lower right corner, and a small road bending away into the trees. The beds of plants and rock ornaments were walled by six feet of the same red bricks that the Hall itself had been built from. She saw the open door in the wall on her right, and the marine shades through it, and she was drawn. Not bothering with the rear entrance to the house, she was unaware of the

garden table capsized in the kitchen, its shade umbrella folded like a captive orca's fin. The seagulls broke from their formation, and swept out towards sea, as dogs leading their masters would. She walked across the soft grass, and through the old brickwork frame. Out on the ledge, the birds became even louder, a frantic mass of feathers and noise. Alicia hunched herself under their warning, and made for the dead trees. They were sickly-coloured and brittle, having died in shameful cowers at the edge of the forest, shunned for their afflictions. Her head was light and cotton as she tip-toed along the discoloured carpet; she hadn't been in control of herself ever since she had reached the abandoned grounds. Everything that had clanged in her head about flights and parents and rock stars and her life was gone, wrapped and taken from her, leaving her with nothing. She was moving without reason or known intention, but moving towards the dead trees.

She stopped and stood, her sneakered foot inches from the beginning of the drop, her trembling body parallel with the edge. Her pupils were thrown deep into the coal brown passages of the forest, scarlet-claystone in the corner of one eye, salty blue in the other. There was a sudden cold presence behind her, and pressures on the ball of her shoulder and between the bony blades of her upper back.

She span as she fell, the distance and the cruel laws of inertia not giving her time to prepare. Snapped out of the daze as the push jerked her head backwards, she knew only surprise and shock as she hit the rocks. All breath and hope of breathing was expelled by the impact, and she felt her insides harden. Lying crookedly, and facing out to sea open-mouthed, she didn't see the others beside her. The waves were lapping around the rocks, shy and unsure of this new plaything. Alicia's last thought was that they should have been making watery sounds, but that they weren't. She would have voiced this complaint had her throat not been filled with something horrible and metallic. Unable to swallow, she was in the middle of gurgling when the red warmth fell across her eyes and she gave in to the tired notion of sleep.



