

Home.Prologue

It was only ever the light sleepers who were awake in time to peer through the cracked curtains, in parts equal drawn to the astonishingly surreal sight, and terrified to their souls by the thoughts of consequence should they be caught watching him. Their hides would be the first to shake with the nervous early morning shiver, and more often than not, the firm tremble would bring with it a dull throbbing reminder of the most recent crossing they'd had with him. They were two in number, both boys, and both perceptive enough to realise the horror that would befall them if he knew they were looking out through the dirty spider-webbed window at that time. The taller boy would lean forwards over the top of the younger's head, knowing that to widen the gap in the musty curtain to afford them both level footing brought them a little nearer to being discovered, and ultimately a big mistake to make.

What little noise they made was insufficient to stir any of the others in the room. Leaving their posts to silently shake friends into joining them was never an option; once the two had tiptoed across the cold wooden laths to investigate the telltale creaks, their wide attentive eyes would never leave the tree, and they could not be pulled away until he had finished. They could not call out to their night-breathing brethren. Even a whisper dangled a threat above them, promising to squeeze through the window frame, and attach itself to a passing breeze, one which would carry it all the way to his jug ears. They were reduced to watching it as two, and padding back to bed and the remainder of their sleep when it was over. On the rare occasions when they found themselves alone during the day, they would dance and skip around the subject, both confused and convinced into believing that what they were experiencing was some kind of weekly dream. After a month of hints hidden deep in evasive eyes, the probes began. Teasing questions about nightmares, and in particular, those that seemed to happen over and over again. It was the younger boy who took the boldest step of his formative years in suggesting that his compatriot knew as much as he did. Assurances were swapped, and relief poured as a juice into their stomachs, before fermenting itself into a jagged wine of discomfort. To finally confirm that the fuddled glut of strange images and sleepy disbelief was

real enough to be known to each other was massive. And too massive to withhold.

They mulled long and hard over who to tell, and how to tell them. There would only be a handful of opportunities per day, moments when he would not be controlling them from the top of the classroom, or overseeing their windy playtime, wrapped in a generous overcoat that could easily warm four of the twenty frozen orphans under his watchful eye. Speaking was forbidden at mealtimes, and the sounds of the beating taken by the last one to breach that rule were advisably fresh. And there was also a crude attempt at security to consider – what were they going to do with this bizarre discovery? Who could they trust with it?

They would not tell the girls, and that much was a given. They were new, and quiet, and had yet to hold themselves properly. It wasn't entirely their fault; their own sanctuary - a sister building to the groaning old schoolhouse they were temporarily calling home – had been completely destroyed by fire. That they were the only three child survivors weighed heavily on the newcomers' frail shoulders. For the duration of their enforced stay at Craggach Ní Riain, they were to be furtively segregated from the boys, and given their own small dormitory on the west wing of the house, a hastily converted larder. As the Brothers swore and begged of their elders to relieve their cliff top holding of this cursed distraction, staff limitations and rigid commands from on high forced them into sharing out their classroom, where the three new arrivals migrated into their own consistent huddle, effectively assisting efforts to keep them and the curious regulars apart. Despite conspiratorial mutters to the contrary, the official line was that the charred remains twelve miles down the coast would be rebuilt almost immediately, and hence there was little or no point in uprooting the three girls once more. Especially considering the existing overflow at the nearest girls' home two counties over, and – more favourably – the excellent job the administrators at the spacious Craggach Ní Riain were doing in patrolling the *situation*. With chins suitably buttered and selves inflated, the Brothers returned to their post, fixed on continuing their good work. In time, they would come to relax themselves in the face of the great distraction, and as the weeks passed and the three short-term boarders stepped slowly and gingerly

from their shells, the Brothers found themselves just as willing to discipline the girls when necessary as though they were their own boys.

The two early-morning risers settled on telling the five heavy breathers who shared their airy sleeping quarters, and no more. If they included any of the other rooms, they ran the risk of having the corridors roamed by interested parties, and subsequently the chances of being discovered by another of the Brothers was greater than if they managed to contain the fascination within their own streaked walls. And one evening, with the just-quenched lamp coughing waves of oily indignation into the air, the storytellers made their move, insisting that all five boys gather around the central bed to hear something that would make their eyes pop.

They began by affirming that what they had seen was real, that they had both watched with their own sleepy eyes, and seen it not once, not twice, not thrice, but four times – every Sunday morning in turn since they had first walked towards the creaking noises. It was a sight that was as disturbing as it was hilarious, simultaneously tickling them to laughter, and turning their guts inside out. This beast of a man, this cruel and persistent machine of punishment, this father figure who had drawn blood from each and every one of them in turn, now swinging himself gently on the same rope contraption the children used daily. His folds of fat swathed in robe, pudgy fingers clasping the weathered rope on either side, and a look of eerie content across his ruddy face. It was as though the devil himself was asking to play tag with them. Back and forth, back and forth. The day had barely broken, and the colours were all yawning. But he was as colourful and as striking as ever. Each time, it would seem that he eventually grew tired of the sawing effect the knots were having on his huge frame as he sat squashed on the plank seat. He would then haul himself from the swing, and make for the second of their playthings, a single rope hanging from a rubbery branch overhead. It offered a challenge to those who wished to climb it, or simply swing around and away without the constraints of the other apparatus. Always, he tugged the rope back towards himself, and skipped heavily forward, twisting and spinning around as his weight brought him in an arc back to where he had started. He would lift his feet carefully from the ground, and wrap them around each other mere inches from the bottom of the rope. The watchers knew that as the branch overhead sagged dramatically, the tree

would be whimpering painfully; older, wiser and larger than the demon pulling down on its fingers, but unable to do any more than weep silently to itself.

As he span through his breathless dawn circle, he would always come to face the hiding sleep-eyes. They would freeze more rigidly than ever before, knowing that even the dance of an eyelash behind the curtain would be enough distortion where he should only have seen nothing. His trajectory would soon take him back and away, looking instead out across the mewling sea, and they would be free to release the stifled breaths. Free to address the cramps and the terrified itches, knowing that they only had seconds of movement before the cold uncaring laws of inertia brought him around again. In this time, they would always allow the same glorious fantasy to hug them softly in the morning air – the rope would somehow become elastic, and stretch to maybe ten times its original length. He would be carried through, a look of complete and utter horror on his cruel face as he hurtled helplessly out and away from the play area, across the patchy grassland and eventually out to sea. His demise would be long and painful, either by lungs filled with salty Atlantic freeze, or by bones shattered to a fine dust on the rocks below.

The strains of fear, misery and sheer hopelessness had forged the purest kind of unity in the home, and what was one boy's was every boy's. They shared everything that could feasibly be shared. Bullying and selfishness were unnecessary occupations, because The Master was taking care of both for them. Whenever a brave soul managed to secure extra treats from unguarded tables or kitchens, he would hold and save his winnings until able to share them out – at the very least – with those he bedded down with. There were very few secrets, though there was much that they didn't speak of. And so it was that the knowledge of his dawn games could not remain within any subset circle inside the main. Once the seven boys sharing the oak-facing room knew, it was only a matter of hours, perhaps days before the words were understandably leaked. The initial reluctance on the part of the first two watchers to pass on their finding would prove to be well founded. In the open, their bizarre discovery became one of very few things the orphans had against him; he didn't know that they knew, so they held the upper hand in this one. It was nothing, but enough to excite each one of them for days. And then

the folly of their loose tongues reared its head, and struck down as a serpent.

It took a degree of organisation unheard of for their ages to prepare the eager watchers for the next morning performance. The children were split into groups of four, in order to reduce the numbers shuffling through the hallways at a forbidden hour. Each group was given a weekly slot, drawn by pebble games, and though some were disappointed to have their first experience of the ghastly show deferred for a month, they understood the importance of the rules, and instead looked forward patiently. They would count on the whispers of their luckier peers to whet their appetites sufficiently until the day they would eat.

And on the grey December morning when the first bright-eyed group took up their positions, the early air clattered silently with nervous energy and happy terror. Four sets of eyes blinked out through the meticulously crafted peepholes, supervised expertly by those who had conceived them. It took mere seconds of giddy observation for them to trigger that something was wrong. Where was the swing on which he would sit? Where was the rope on which he would pull? They could see the remains of weathered knots dangling high from branches, and a clump of wet wood and rope on the ground under the tree. They would have voiced their surprise had the leaders not painfully sworn them to silence.

When The Master appeared, he seemed to ghost across and out into their playing paddock. There had been no sound to suggest his coming, no door slapping shut, no footsteps on the gravel. Their spines tightened as they froze with breaths lumping in their throats, and the two supervisors knowingly recognised the actions. Eight shining eyes were fixed on him as he tramped across the grass, his gait reflecting some kind of growing unhappiness. From their position by the window, they could see the fists forming as he stopped under the fatherly shadow of the tree. He kicked gently at the heap of plank and rope, and looked up at the sawed knot remains overhead. He turned around and away from the sight of his murdered plaything, facing the cluttered window, but glaring angrily skywards. The two boys in the middle of four recognised the claret rage on his red face, and panicked. They pulled back from the curtains in

unison, and tried to move away. Their bundling process caused the boy on the left end to lose his balance, and he fell forwards, knocking his head against the window. The sound was dull but explosive in the quiet, amplified a thousand times over by the clothed scrambles of the two deserters. The boy who hadn't moved had his eyes still fixed on the agitated beast outside, and felt a sudden warm rush of urine down the inside of his leg as The Master dropped his head in a flash to lock eyes firmly on the window behind which the helpless were hidden.

There was a growl of incredulous recognition, and he began sprinting back across the worn soil. The fourth and final boy turned around to address the terrified others with a spastic fear on his face, a fear that said all that needed to be said; The Master was coming. They could do nothing. Even the two who were not supposed to be in that room could not move. They heard one door, two doors, three doors opening and closing. They heard the rapid claps of his feet approaching. They heard the briefest jangle of the doorknob before he burst into the room in a blur of brown robe, red skin and snow white forth.

The first boy he reached did not stand a chance, and took the club of the vicious stubbled stick full across his face. He crumpled to the floor, temporarily unable to cry, too consumed by the shock, the taste of iron in his mouth, and the sick wobbling feeling in his nose. The next boy fared no better, taking a strike across the back of his shoulders that winded him completely, and a second upswing into his groin that left him passing blood for days. Before the other Brothers got to him, he had reached each of the seven at least once during the blind whirlwind, leaving a trail of cracked bones, horrible wheezing cries, and crippling numb pain. When he had been dragged away, the injured were taken to another room and attended to as the Brothers best knew how. Their screams would wake the entire home, leaving dozens shuddering in their beds, knowing nothing but knowing enough.

Later that day, he took advantage of a subdued washing time to tear the rooms apart, and found a missing knife amongst the things of another boy. He was taken from the washroom and the confession was not long in spilling from the shaking lips of a child already broken by terror. He was then beaten bare-fisted into unconsciousness, and left in

his room. The younger ones who shared his quarters thought it strange that he should sleep all day, blackened and bloody but peaceful, and they nervously dubbed it 'Sleeping Day'. With the children's playing and eating times revoked, the uninjured huddled together to ask why their friend had been so foolish in turning his temper. In time, they would grow to understand that even given the repercussions, something that gave The Master a kind of pleasure had been taken away, and that unhappiness had been visited upon him. And so it was that the martyr of 'Sleeping Day' was born, and the orphans rejoiced quietly in a major strike back against their cursed enemy.

But that was by no means the end of the broken swing matter. Three days after that, The Master received a note of maddening consequence, an anonymous piece of simple prose mocking his plight, and apparently daring him – through a series of metaphors – to admit to his now-banished dawn fixes before an assembly of children. The note was handwritten, elegant, far from the usual scrawls he sneered at in his classroom, and decorated with the kind of margin designs seen in the Book of Kells at Trinity. His fury this time was more focused; he sought the most artistically inclined child, a boy of thirteen, and ignored his pleas of innocence before breaking the four knuckles on his right hand. He insisted that the spectacle serve as a deterrent to anybody else considering such idiocy, and that the matter of their destroyed plaything was finished.

But the notes came again and again, spread out over weeks and months. Never to him, but to the children, who quickly determined that the person responsible was not the person blamed, but somebody else. They would find them under their pillows at morning, short and wonderful stories, each one containing a hidden task for them to puzzle over. Those who couldn't read so well were read to. Ignoring the tasks were never an option, as they learned in time the awful consequences of disrespecting the mysterious writer. He was vengeful enough for the children to wonder briefly if it was The Master himself, playing the most cruel of tricks upon them. But then they learned that the destruction of the swing had been at the behest of the very first recorded note; why would he have his happiness cut down like that? Each task brought with it a level of awkwardness or danger, the subsequent potential of punishment, and only a fraction survived without incurring the wrath of

Brothers perturbed by the sudden outbreak of misbehaviour. They didn't know that their boys (and eventually, girls too) were acting reluctantly on behalf of a new and unknown evil, an unseen entity who moved through the children one by one. It began with the elder of the two original watchers, and a challenge to remove and destroy vestments from the head Brother's quarters. The writer promised to burn the boy in his bed lest he failed. Making nervous light of the threat, the note was binned, and little more thought of. A week later, the boy woke to the screams of his friends and a searing blanket of flames. Though his burns would eventually heal, the fear that spread through the old house would never.

It continued through the death of a twelve year old boy, found hanging by his neck from the rafters in the abandoned attics; according to some whispers, he had been fearfully suicidal after lighting a small fire in the chapel – as demanded by his note – and decided to beat the Brothers to the taking of his life. Others suggested that the demand had been for the gutting of the chapel, and that he had received the ultimate penalty for failing to achieve.

It was quite probably one of the younger boys who came up with the name for the malevolent note-writer, once he became sufficiently part of their miserable lives to earn a petrified respect to match that of their Master. The note-writer never signed his name, or cared anything for identification, and so had to be given a title. It came to pass that whenever the routine early morning sweep under the pillow yielded a papery result, the bearer was said to have heard from The Chipler.

Home

Home.1

Without the warm orange murmur of the city lights, the land seemed to darken and shy away like a child making strange as I nosed my way through the countryside. The rented Primera was a joy to drive, even though I had eased her from the spacious freedom of the motorway into the black uncertainty of country roads. The new and expensive six-lane development was unfamiliar, and I was in no mood for missing exits and prolonging my prodigal return. So I took the easy way out, and opted for the old Dublin to Carlow route, through Naas and Kilcullen – ‘weak footballing towns’, as my father used to comment on our bimonthly trips to the capital to visit relations in Dun Laoighre. My brother and I would invite him to expand on his theorems and beliefs as we bore down on the city, knowing that giving him the pleasure of a pipe-chewing half-hour imparting his GAA wisdom was always good for our eventual cause: asking to be excused from the stale coffee smells of Aunt Maureen’s, hoping to be sent out alone onto the pier with a little extra silver something jingling in our pockets.

That’s pretty indicative of the way our minds worked during our formative years, and also of the way in which Mark and I grew through being forced so closely together. The old folks should never have had kids at their age, and you’d count on one hand comfortably the times when they themselves would disagree. And by the time they realised the error of their ways, there were two of us, the bare year apart, turning to each other as soon as we could crawl for the attention our dejected parents were incapable of giving. To myself and my brother, it was no big deal; we knew no differently, and we knew no better. It wasn’t as though we were neglected; in truth, we never went without. And unlike some of our more unfortunate peers in the estate, we weren’t born into feuding families kicking each other senselessly from one month to the next, neither side capable of remembering the original disagreement if pressed. Our stomachs never rumbled as struggling parents spent dole grocery money desolately on shandies in Fagan’s on a Monday afternoon. And in hindsight, our aversion of the late-Sixties altar boy abuse campaign was probably (and in tandem) down to the grace of God and the fact that Mark and I lived in each other’s pockets. Neither member of the priest-nun tag team had the nerve to wander into the changing room with more

than one boy present, and I refused to serve Mass without my brother, and he did likewise.

I was making good time, and wasn't due to pull up at Mark's place until ten, so I stopped in the small village of Moone on the Kildare/Wicklow border for something quick, greasy and portable to eat. Although it had been pushing towards twenty years since the last time I knocked the dust of Moone from my feet, the place filled out to just about as much as I would have remembered, and that wasn't a whole lot. I'd bought my first car round about the time when Mark started seeing a girl from the village, and he used and abused my good nature to secure lifts home for her whenever she put on the family frock and bussed into Carlow to attend a disco. Girls never really were a problem for us – if anything, it was the guys who were posing more of a threat. Apparently, it was queer of me to care so much about my brother, and to want to spend time with him. This particular dinosaur only raised its scaly head when I moved from the Brothers into the just-opened Regional College, from the comfortable surrounds of townfolk to the streetwise and worldly intelligence of boarders from the cities and larger towns of Ireland. It was of no consequence to me – what little time I would have had for these morons was used exclusively for my own academic means and social needs, but I was wise enough to the concern that bubbled behind Mark's eyes, so I did what little I could to act accordingly. It tied in well with our shared discovery of the fairer gender, the making of new friends, and also with a late second-wind upsurge of interest on the part of Mother and Father, so it wasn't as though we needed each other any more. Then, it was down to choice.

I have always maintained that I was forced to head to England by the economic climate in Ireland at the time, and that's probably ninety per cent true. The other ten per cent was down to feeling a little stagnant, and also a little left out as I lost more and more of my brother to the woman he would end up marrying. She was confident, assured, attentive – very hard to dislike, and God knows I did try. In fact, she was possibly the last new person my aunt Brid liked before she slipped into gentle madness, a berth in which she would be joined by her sister – my mother – twelve years on. In turn, she would sadly be kept company by my father, who began fighting his own weakness and mental demons a few short

months later. Once the shock and the reflex fears about genetic conditions had passed, and the consultations and arrangements had been made, to me – and all my intents and purposes – we had left them dying with as much dignity as possible, and breathing their last in a sunny retirement home down by the river, happy in their own fading worlds. Whether it was one of Mark's weekly visits, one of my guilty biannual crusades, or the huge dumpy matron sweeping in to tend to their daily needs, they could barely tell one from the other some days. By this time, I had settled in Croydon after years on the sites of London, working in a news room while finishing off my night-school studies. For four years, I winced every time my jangling phone displayed the Irish international prefix, fearing a funeral. But aside from the odd heartfelt yet hammed suggestion from Janet, advising me to think a little harder about making a couple of extra trips back across the water to check in with her in-laws, there was never any call for such trepidation. The parents were going nowhere, and seemingly heading stubbornly towards an amazing century apiece. After a further two years, they were unwittingly getting nearer to costing my brother and I a small fortune as we helped out financially with the supplementing. Not that I would ever take issue, I hastened to add, whenever the moan surfaced in company. My argument was simply that while I was willing to plunge into my freelance pocket until it absolutely had to bite back, I had slowly drawn weary of trekking back to a hometown in which my childhood home now belonged to an unfriendly family of eight; a hometown in which my needfully incarcerated parents were only occasionally capable of recognising me; a town that with each passing year felt more like Travis Bickle's New York than a home. And so it was that I had not darkened the outer limits of Carlow in well over two years.

And I might have stretched that past three had the planets not aligned to shake up my world in a snow globe of circumstance.

The long and arrow-like road that creeps away from Castledermot always plays like the proverbial final straight, with a dingy mini-golf course, dilapidated truck stop and the Green Acres lounge in turn cheering me on from the dark grandstands as I near the finishing line. The car purred through the welcoming roundabouts and the quiet efficiency of the new industrial park, before taking me in amongst the

catacombs of estates on the east side of the town. A number of developments had sprung up in the time since I'd last been back, and I marvelled at the way in which the property gurus consistently managed to recycle words from the same limited set, to form new and catchy names for their shiny over-priced properties. Mark's pad was in Ashwood, probably the elder statesman of the estates in the area. I lifted the car onto the path outside Number 43 within seconds of ten bells, pulled my bag from the back seat and locked the panting vehicle behind me.

There was a full-compliment welcoming party to greet me – a firm smiling handshake from my brother, a simple peck on the cheek from Janet, and hugs from both of my nieces, though Amy's was a lot less enthusiastic than her sister's. Given that the former was now sixteen, and in the thralls of those difficult teenage years, perfectly understandable. Wearing combat trousers and a T-shirt emblazoned with 'Placebo', she looked the part. Happily, even with two years having passed since our last exposure to each other, and little more than a handful of phone conversations and scribbled letters, Chloe was showing no such reluctance. I had left her as a bright and inquisitive six year old, and very little appeared to have changed in that regard. She linked arms with me as I was led into the sitting room.

'Do you know when you eat crisps?'

'I sure do.'

'And if you rub your eyes after eating them?'

'Go on.'

'How come you can smell the crisps on your fingers after rubbing your eyes?'

Laughing out loud was possibly inappropriate, so I frowned proposingly instead.

'Because you still have the crisps on your hands.'

She shook her head.

'No. Even if you wash your hands, and there's no smell left.

Then rub your eyes and the smell comes back.'

She was deadly serious. There came a groan from her older sister, quite possibly familiar with the quest of query.

'I have no idea. I must try it, and see what you're talking about.'

That seemed to placate her, enough so to not mind when her mother asked her to go and see if the kettle had finished boiling. As she trotted out towards the kitchen, Janet needlessly apologised for the breathless line of questioning.

The eagerness of the welcome, and the black-heart-melting abilities of Mark's youngest served to shunt sideways my simmering strains of awkwardness. There would be time for all that later. I handed over the presents I had picked up at the airport, and nibbled politely at the light supper placed in front of me, regardless of what I'd had to say about Moone chippers. With the two kids in the room, it was never going to be heavy; the parents would not get around to quizzing me about the gaping holes in my personal and professional lives – two distinct entities that had managed to co-exist in relative harmony until brought crashing down together so recently by their common denominator, my own good self. I took advantage of the feather air, taking the opportunity to process the changes in the household, and the faces of those in it. Surprisingly, Mark was beginning to show some grey in the dark brown above his temples, which should have been an embarrassment for a soul so young. I fulfilled my brotherly duty in drawing attention to his badgeriness, and he took it in reasonable spirit. For years now, there had always been a bottle of coloured security hidden away in my bathroom closet, but nobody ever needed to know about that. Amy was still every bit as bruin as her sister, though the additional steps in her tan spoke of artificial assistance rather than the annual family holiday to Fuerteventura alone. Janet, of whom the girls had only ever taken eyes, was the lightest in the room, freshly slimmed and aided in that by her new blonde bob.

Chloe had picked up on an unusually-named Dublin borough at the end of the early evening TV news bulletin: Dolphin's Barn. It was a pretty curiously contradictive place name for anybody to grasp; surely it was black and white – cows lived in barns, dolphins lived in water? But her interest was more in scorning the silliness of the name and the namers, whoever they may have been. As quick as ever, in minutes my brother and I had developed our lines of investigation and good-humoured imagination to propose a totally unrelated Animal Heroes Championship. All of the great animal helpers – Lassie, Skippy, Flipper, and a handful of others long since removed to the dustbin of children's

television – would duke it out to determine the greatest one of all. Except that Flipper would be at a distinct disadvantage, seeing as the competition would more than likely take place on dry land. So we decided that in the interests of fair play, the dolphin would be provided with a basic skateboard-like contraption. Janet smiled patiently; her daughters were more perplexed by the childish adults than amused.

Once the girls had sighed their goodnights, I planned to make my excuses and head for the solitude of the guestroom, leaving the concerned inquisitions for another time. But Janet beat me to it. She announced that she was exhausted from her day's exertions, and that I was not to take insult from the fact that she too was hitting the pillow. Mark fished a pair of Smithwicks from the fridge just as soon as she had left, and slipped a Springsteen live compilation into the stereo to fill out the background ambience. We drank our way through a six pack, and stopped just short of half-twelve. Not once did he pause to give me grief for neglecting my dutiful son visitation duties; maybe he did understand after all. Then again, maybe he was equally hurt to feel that I was forgetting about him and his family, and not just our parents. This much was far from true – I had invited the four of them over at Christmas for a few days, but one of the girls had fallen sick, and put those plans on hold before respective schedules led to further postponements. Equally, I had never forgotten about the old folks; I asked after them during every phone conversation without fail. I was just tired of having to see them that way, tired of feeling as awful as I did watching them as no more than shells.

But having been away for so long, and gone about my return in the way I did, I knew that the tribunal was merely waiting around a corner. To aid the mood, I promised to answer all the questions he had as a consequence of our last conversation just as soon as I had a good night's sleep under my belt.

'Hey, it's not necessarily any of my business', raising his can in some kind of salute.

'I know I'm not getting away that easily', I grinned in response.

Home

The occasional glances of concern that night assured me that I had some work to do in proving that I had managed to re-hinge myself soon after offering Mark the original and full extent of my white rage. In truth, maybe I had been a little dramatic in setting up my holiday at home. The phone call had been littered with histrionics and overseen by blind anger. I readily admit that I did not approach dealing with the double whammy blow with any kind of focus or maturity. Fair enough – getting out of London for a little while was a winner of an idea, though my impending cash flow situation left me with no option but to start crawling homewards. And while my only living relatives were as happy as ever to welcome me into their fold, each persistent reflection on the ham-fisted Tom Lacey Travel Agency phone call reminded me that they knew very little of my situation; nothing more than the skin on my angry soup.

Home

Home.2

Despite the insistence that I use whatever I needed from the rack of toiletries in the bathroom, this year's extra discomfort in being the awkward guest persisted, and so I rose just before nine on my first full day back, intent on doing some shopping. Janet was already busying herself in the newly-wooded kitchen, and perhaps secretly a little annoyed at having her early Saturday morning privacy disturbed. I didn't argue as she nonetheless sat me at the table, quickly shoving a steaming mug of coffee and a plate piled deep with cooling toast under my nose. Like I've said, a hard woman to dislike. She adjusted the volume on the gormless local radio station, poured herself a mixture of coffee and cream, and eased onto the bench at the opposite end, hands cupped around her froth for warmth.

'What has you up so early? Is the bed OK?'

I smiled: 'The bed's fine. I just need to get some things. In town.'

'Right.'

I wasn't offering to go into specifics, because I knew damn well that she'd only probe and silently search for the psychological reasonings behind me not wanting to use their bathroom accessories. Or something like that.

'Well, depending on where you're going, I might get you to pick up a couple of things for me. God knows when the two girls will be up, and I have my art class this morning.'

'Sure, no problem.'

It was an old school trick; settling an uneasy child with a job to make him or her feel important. Recognising it felt like accepting a hug from a crab; a kind of assurance, but with the pinchy threat of wondering why she thought I needed it. In the first uncomfortable silence left as we sipped simultaneously, I figured that it could have been worse. She could have been making roundabout enquiries about Heather.

The Carlow morning was heavy with weekend shoppers, moods souring by the minute as they battled for free spaces in the giant car parks. I walked by Pollerton Road, more familiar than any centre-bound avenue, with little or no changes to frown upon. Unabated by all that had sprung

up around her, the supermarket I had shopped in as a boy still stood on the town's main thoroughfare, albeit renamed and under a different nationwide franchise. I glided through the neon aisles at no great pace, avoiding the smattering of exasperated stock-car mothers hurling their trolleys – with red-faced toddler co-drivers – around corners with precious little concern for any other human forms. With my purchases made, I ambled back onto the main street, enjoying the waking sun on my face. Had I been twenty years younger, the classic façade of the old Coliseum cinema would have been smirking warmly at me, its lobby a perfect recreation of the glory day box offices of vintage Americana. As it was, in its cosy but rodent-infested place lay a gaping traffic-barriered entrance, leading to the pride and joy of the consumer populace: the shopping centre. The great grey shoeboxes of the multi-screen cinema and the warehouse roofs of the main building hulked quietly in the hazy distance. Though undoubtedly an economic and commercial success, I had silently branded the joint a miserably poor effort at creating a Yankee-lite mall when my excited niece first dragged me there by the hand some years before. And even if it were the finest collection of shops and coffee docks to ever grace these shores, it would still be standing on the site of Thompson's steelworks, the yard of which was used by the English to execute Carlovians during the 1798 rebellion. Which lent itself to some rather topical marketing blurbs – *'our prices will kill you, just like your ancestors!!'* – slogans probably vetoed by the slim remaining tracts of good taste.

In no hurry to get back to Mark's, I made for the new public library at Cathedral Close. Its grand opening had happened round about the last time I'd been home, but I hadn't been invited. Again, the replacement building was a horrible, bright and soulless concrete version of a Porto cabin, shameful in comparison to the previous subterranean venue on Dublin Street; an old-style library that exuded the kind of hallowed authority capable of clamping awed manners on most kinds of disrespectful whelps. Squinting against the harsh dry lights, I skirted around the edges of the large room, glancing at categories and shelf titles before noticing one of the two youngish desk librarians becoming free. Aimless browsing was not the order of the day. I had a minor quest of sorts.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for the spoken word section?'

'Sorry?'

'Um, the spoken word section. Books on tape, CD, that kind of thing.'

The instant wobbles in her brow did not bode for wellness.

'Er, we don't have any books on tape. Sorry.'

'You don't?'

'Sorry.'

I was genuinely surprised, but retained enough grip to understand that querying her as to why they did not have any books on tape would be fruitless. She looked as likely to laugh as to know anything of importance.

'I see. Thank you.'

So much for a quest. Shot down before I had even struggled into my suit of armour. I moved away from the desk, a little crestfallen. I had been hoping to track down a copy of a cassette box set entitled 'Monster Maker', one I had taken from the library as a boy, and renewed every two weeks for half a year, until I eventually grew sick of it. The story centred around a character my own age at the time, who became intrigued by a secret robotic monster being brought to life by some genius nutcase, and I was taken. Some time ago, I came across a tape among my shoeboxes of radio bootleg compilations, marked in fading pen as 'MM2', and barely audible. Sadly, it was only one tape of three, but that sixty minutes of crackling and hissing dialogue (read by a most hypnotic and husky gentleman) was enough to drag back all the fascination and childish captivation. I spent subsequent weeks scouring the Internet for any mention – mail order service or otherwise – of 'Monster Maker', but found nothing. In the stinging fog of the last week before I headed for Heathrow, I formalised a plan that involved using my sudden break in the hometown to root through the original source; the public library. If I could find it, I would take it and make my own copy. A good copy. If I wasn't eligible to take anything on loan, I could get Mark or one of the kids to do it for me. How and ever, sage people do say things about best laid plans and them never hatching.

I was pushing my way back through the glass doors when I heard my name being called, as more of a query than an assured hail. I

turned, and saw a smartly-dressed woman making for me, her face asking all kinds of questions. She stopped a metre short of my reconsidered post just inside the door, her eyes widening in a smile. It was the boyish grin that brought me the name I had searched for in that frantic split-second, leaving me free to work my own cheerful face.

'Tom? It is Tom Lacey, isn't it?'

'It sure is. Great to see you again, Marie.'

She pumped my hand vigorously, in a manner that suggested maybe she was used to shaking men firmly by the hand. Having forgotten her vocation, I would turn out to be right on that one.

'And you. Jesus, how long has it been?'

I let go of her hand and laughed, unsure of the numbers. There were big smiles to spare.

'Years. Many of them.'

'It has, it has.'

'You look great. You haven't aged a week.'

There was still something of a breathless edge to our encounter. She blushed slightly.

'And you're still the charmer, I see.'

A charmer who never quite managed to charm you, I could have muttered, but didn't.

'I do my best.'

'Sure, sure.'

There followed the tiniest of pauses as she regrouped for breath. I honestly didn't know what to say in turn, and elected to give her another shot, blinking instead.

'Listen, are you free or do you have somewhere to be?'

I checked my watch needlessly; didn't even register the time.

'Free as a very free thing.'

'Right. Well just let me check these books out, and I'll take you up to Brookes' for a coffee. We'll catch up.'

Brookes' could just as easily have been a burlesque house for all I knew, but I was probably safe in assuming she'd not be leading me astray.

'Sounds good to me.'

She turned away in a dramatic cloud of whooshing and amiable perfume, and conducted her business at the desk with my helpful librarian friend. I scanned the cork notice board during the forty seconds that

passed, before holding the door open for the grey-suited forty-something and heading back out into the sunlight.

As we walked, I managed to determine that Brookes' was a 'café bar', a yearling addition to the hotel-cum-nightclub complex on Tullow Street. I was amused by the notion of Carlow needing a 'café bar', and suggested as much. Inevitably, it led to a brief moan about the faux-prosperous state of the town in general. Marie was good-humouredly having none of it.

'What has you so down on your own hometown? The big cheese in the big smoke doesn't need us anymore, huh?'

Had it been twelve hours later in the day, and we were catching up over drinks in a fashionable bar, I would readily have explored the hint of distaste in her voice. But first thing in the morning, I was good for little more than deflecting her gently.

'No, it's not that. I just prefer it the way it was. Small. None of this shopping mall, café bar, ring-road crap.'

'Aw, you want to keep it all to yourself.'

'No, I just don't see the need to be America's Mini-Me. Why take all these cues from them at once?'

She looked comically back over her shoulder as she moved out of the morning and into a cool manicured alleyway. We made our way to the end, and into Brookes' which was empty save for a guy scribbling furtively on a notepad while his double latte smouldered beside him. Marie took it upon herself to order coffee for us both, and joined me at the table I had chosen; the furthest away from the writing man. While we waited for the hungover girl behind the counter to bring our cups, the conversation slipped back to my psychological issues.

'It's rich – you're living in London for what, twenty years? You'd think you'd be used to it.'

'I am. I'm just not used to this place changing so much.'

And sitting where I was in the early hours of my first weekend at home in a long time was not helping. I wondered briefly how much more could be strung from the topic, already tired of it. But as with Janet a little earlier, I figured that Marie could just as easily have been prying into my more uncomfortable personal affairs, so I changed nothing. I didn't want to have to give her my new 'mind your own business' standard answer of

'I'm between marriages, actually.' She wore no rings of her own, which meant very little, but I have found that those with less to boast of are less likely to force the subject. The coffee arrived, and I found a sudden analogy behind my eyes.

'It's like a little girl putting on her mother's makeup, and dressing in her clothes. Wanting to grow up too quickly.'

She looked amused, which was admittedly a secondary aim of mine. I didn't want to come across as a funless miserable jerk, having only just reintroduced myself to her. What with her never succumbing to my moves as a younger adult when we last played the game, I didn't want to rule out any chances of the replay somehow kicking off during my holiday. It's strange the way the mind can work sometimes. I was planning on moving on without even knowing it.

'That's a pretty strange picture.'

I flashed a warm and comical grin.

'I suppose it is.'

She was pleased enough with the tip in direction to remain within the metaphor.

'And while you can always smack a child's bottom, how do you smack a town?'

I would have retorted playfully with something about smacking the town planners and the farmers on the council, but I had a sneaking suspicion that Marie took her job – I had remembered – very seriously. Besides, maybe it was too soon for innuendos about spanking and punishment. Maybe later. I chose a safer route.

'I'm sure the town will shoot itself in the foot, don't you worry about that.'

'Well, if it's what you're getting at, this kind of progress has its knock backs, fair enough.'

'Go on.'

'Well, it's the modern trend – more people, more crime. This town can be a rough place at times.'

'No kidding?'

She was frowning, lumpy lines sneaking across her forehead.

'It seems to be the price to pay.'

'That's no good.'

'I know. It seems like there isn't a week goes by without an attack of some kind, somewhere. I don't know what's wrong with people today.'

'Me neither.'

'A double stabbing in a nightclub toilet – you wouldn't hear of it in Detroit.'

'Jesus Christ. When?'

'Two weeks ago. Nobody caught for it, needless to say. And there was that thing in Milford a couple of months back. Sick.'

I hadn't heard of it, needless to say.

'What was that?'

She looked up from stirring her coffee absent-mindedly.

'You didn't hear about it?'

I threw another of the smiles onto the table.

'It's kinda hard to come across *The Nationalist* in Croydon, you know?'

She bared her teeth in recognition of the jibe, and took a mouthful of rapidly cooling caffeine. And then told me all about the thing in Milford.

When she had finished, I asked a few additional questions, hoping to manage to mask what quickly became burning intrigue. She seemed to have exhausted any interest she may have had in the happening almost straight away, and laughed heartily at my sudden fervour, so I graciously moved on to another subject. Hotels in the town. In truth, I was suddenly itching for the end of our little reunion, squirming invisibly in my seat. I was unequivocally drawn to the bizarrely macabre image she had painted for me, albeit in a sketched tabloid manner. I wanted to hear more. I wanted to see the damn thing for myself. I wanted a focal point from which I could reference the snapshots I was flicking through in my own mind. What information I had at that point was not enough; the journalist in me raising his notebook-wielding head, perhaps. When her miniature mobile phone began bleeping some unrecognisable and irritating chart hit, I begged quickly behind closed eyes that it was a minor emergency of some kind; anything at all that necessitated her cutting short our coffee morning, leaving me free to do as I pleased. Somebody somewhere was listening.

After a few curt words, she snapped the handset closed, and offered me a wry grin by means of leading into her farewell.

‘Listen, I’m really sorry, but I have to shoot off.’

I didn’t bother feigning disappointment, but had the composure to ask for her number, so that I could call her at some point during my stay, and see about resuming our happy get-together. There was no point removing myself completely from the game for the sake of hurriedly investigating some weirdness in an isolated countryside backwater. She did not hesitate in scribbling her details onto a Breo beer mat, suggesting that maybe we meet up for ‘drinks’ some night, seemingly opening up an entirely different set of opportunities. She squeezed my shoulder as she bustled past, insisting that I did call her, unaware that she was pleasing me on two fronts at that very moment. I was pleased that she was making herself available to me at some point in the not-too-distant future, but also cutting me loose that morning. For ten long minutes, my mind had been elsewhere, and more specifically, trying to patch the gruesome details of Marie’s story into the peaceful waterway memories of a boyhood so familiar with Milford.

Milford was – and still is – one of those places indescribable by a single word. It is not a town, not a village. Not even a proper rural community. It is simply an area around a small canal tacked onto the River Barrow, about four miles from the centre of Carlow Town. There are those who will argue that the farms and homes in the surrounding area constitute enough of a sprawl to be considered a community, but to me, Milford was always about the river, and nothing else. There is an ancient drawbridge across the canal, hidden behind a stubbornly unruined arch, and a series of deep lock gates. The only concession to modern times is a huge guesthouse, which popped up on the marshland between the still canal and the thundering river at some point during the Eighties. On the one occasion when I brought Heather around my favourite Carlovian haunts, she learned all about my vitriol for this structural abhorrence, and joined with me in a jokey mantra, designed to have the looming building sink into the boggy land overnight. I had spent way too many summers running wild among the ferns and the narrow country lanes to have my Milford ruined by the human race. The place had bordered on being a religious haunt for Mark and I; we would

willingly cycle the half-hour-long distance daily during our term holidays, when allowed to. We would swim in the motherly deep waters of the calmest part of the river, dare each other unsuccessfully to dive into the evil lichen darkness of the broody canal, and declare ourselves rulers of the small island in the Barrow's mouth. We would dine and feast on hunks of fresh bread and sour cheese, carefully wrapped in greaseproof paper, and stored in the cool leather shade of my school satchel. Even as a sulky adult returning home with the rains of divorce and job rickets upon my head, Milford held the warmest of childhood memories for me. Hence there was something of a panicked disturbance in my step; unsure as to whether or not I believed what Marie had spoken of, I needed to find out how and why my river-place was getting itself mixed up in what she had just spoken of.

I gauged and waited until she would have strode out from the alleyway and into the sunlight. Then I pulled myself from the table, paid for the coffees, and followed the tiny trace of her scent. Back on the street, I turned right, and made for the offices of *The Nationalist*. Being the local broadsheet, there was no more immediate source of regional information available to me. I could have gone home to Mark's, and scoured their regularly-thinned newspaper collection, but the chances of Janet allowing anything dating back more than a week amongst the selection lay somewhere between none and none. And Mark had not retained the same affection for our childhood haunt as I had – he hadn't mentioned the discovery at all during the phone conversations I had prompted while setting up my stay at his place – so I did not fancy the chances of him keeping any relevant newspaper articles. No, *The Nationalist* was my best option, though it took a little sweetening of the dumpy receptionist – not to mention the flashing of my wavering press credentials – to get me into the press room, and a brief conference with an overworked Breffni Hayes. Once the pleasantries were out of the way, he was only too happy to direct me to the recent archives, needing to get himself back to his 'arseache farmer libel case.' I did not envy the poor bastard. What a way to spend a warm Saturday morning, trawling through the juvenile jibes and insults of our rural brethren.

The headline was 'Shocking Discovery In Milford', about as adventurous and as hard-hitting as I should have dared expect. It was

understandably the lead story, taking up the majority of the print section on the front page, the entire sheet bordered by the kind of bite-sized advertisements that hadn't seemed to change in twenty odd years. There was a colour photograph, which in itself generally spoke of gravity. Or celebration. The gloomy dark greens, browns and turbulent grey-blues of the Barrowside glared back at me, interrupted in places by flashes of fluorescent yellow and white, as policemen and various investigatory figures went about their business in bright waterproofs. It looked as though it was raining in the picture, and that lent itself to lead me to wonder if the river had been warned of the impending intrusion, and spat great mouthfuls of her waters into the sky, intending for them to fall as rain. It would force those who came disturbing her peace with police tape and flashing lights to do so in wet discomfort.

The detailed report – continued on page two – filled in the majority of gaps left by Marie's brief newscast. There had been four skulls, each one in turn hanging by rope from the underside of a stone arch behind the old sluice gate. They would not have been visible from the road, and as such were only discovered by four local teenagers, roaming around on the banks beyond the creaking structure. The boys stumbled upon the macabre sight somewhere between the hours of 12 and 1a.m. on the Sunday morning, and yet didn't alert the police until nearer to three. My immediate suspicion was that there may have been a little drink/drug-driving worry in place, enough to prevent the late-night nature enthusiasts from rushing straight into Carlow Garda Station to rouse the authorities. It was not unheard of for youngsters to stubbornly refuse to sign-off their weekend nights out just as soon as the nightclubs had dumped them onto the street, and the fast food had been eaten. For those with access to cars, there was a wealth of quiet and secluded hillside glens and river-view spaces in which they could wind down properly, drinking, smoking or doing whatever it was they couldn't do anywhere else. Milford was hence a popular place in the a.m., or so I had been led to believe.

Then again, maybe the four were genuinely spooked; even in print, the idea conjured enough whistling images in my head to send a chill through my spine.

After the gruesome details of the finding and its finders, the heavy-handed hack moved through the legal logistics; the skulls were with the state pathologist, but the initial school of thought leaned heavily towards affirming that the bones did not belong to recently-deceased individuals. I'm not quite sure if this line of surmising had been added on behalf of somebody who didn't want the town freaking out over some kind of crazed killer loose on their streets, but the report went on to mention a missing persons list, and the unlikeliness of there being a local caught up in this mess – in any shape of victim.

With my interest now at its apex, I brushed through later editions of the paper, scouring for any further mention of the case. Sure enough, the same reporter returned to assure us all that the tests carried out on the skulls had shown them to belong to nameless souls who had died many years ago. And while this opened up a can of worms that could incorporate cults, devil-worshipping or God-knows-what, he continued, at least it removed the prospect of there being that crazed killer on the prowl. I stayed and read through consequential articles, lost in the fascinating depths of the story until Breffni Hayes bowled through the door, offering 'I'm just going to head off for lunch now', but only barely masking the 'get out, you've overstayed your welcome' part of it. I thanked him for his assistance, and peppered him with a few questions about the case. He answered with a series of dramatic shrugs, knowing no more than that the police were still investigating, but hadn't come any closer to finding who or what was responsible, or where they had acquired the four old skulls.

Though obviously still buried in the finding, I remembered my initial syllabus for the day, and I walked the healthy and sunny mile out the other side of town towards St. Anthony's, unashamedly nervous of seeing my parents for the first time in so long. I fully expected them to have deteriorated, to be even more distant than before, to now have the physical degradation to match their mental. I supposed that I deserved the trauma of seeing them so much weaker before my eyes, having kept mine turned away for two selfish years. As it happened, the cheery woman on duty informed me that the entire home was sleeping off the effects of their late-ish night in with a top local entertainer, and that she was not going to wake them for love or money. Despite the wasted

journey, I found that I wasn't squirming in the hospital-smelling corridors, repelling the discomfort that had gone before. And as I pushed out through the glass reception doors, I let my guard slip long enough to actually hope that I might enjoy being with them both again. The bleaker truth was that I could sit and tell stories of my childhood with them until I was blue in the face, and they might still not know me from Adam.

At times during my trip back from England, and during my first full day home, I found myself marvelling and wondering how I had let things slip so badly. How I had got myself to a position in which I felt as though I had to apologise to everything and everybody around me. I had not seen my parents in over two years. I had not seen my brother or his wonderful family in just under that. I could put one Christmas down to being with Heather's family in St. Ives, an engagement I could not avoid. And then I had been pretty busy around the time of the first missed visit, and put it off. Once you miss one, it's pretty easy to miss another, I guess. Especially when each visit brings with it an audience with two people who look like your mother and father but act like strangers. The explanation didn't justify it, and the ground I needed to make up was vast.

I willingly extended the length of my homeward leg by opting to stop off at a bench in St. Dympna's, taking the time to enjoy the calorie-laden snack lunch I'd picked up along the way. The grounds of the old hospital is a magical place during the autumn, and no eyesore either in summer, with the trees in full plumage and the choirs of sparrows and finches singing happily to the grey face of the buildings. The familiarity of the sheltered woodland surrounding is always a comfort, and one of few things that remains an untouched childhood favourite of mine. We would always walk through on our way to the river, or to the old outdoor pool, which sat importantly and bluely at the head of Shaw Park. I have always admired the Sugar Factory side of town, its terraced streets, homely estates and hidden charms never really changing over the years, as I remembered. That is, as long as one discounts the boorish bruise of the ring-road as it cuts through the quaint heartland. The park is now gone, and in its place sits another clutter of semi-detached houses. It's strange to have the unshakeable sight of the park on a hot

summer's day, the pools filled with squealing children and the coolest teenagers, and the rolling green of the open areas dotted with families. It's strange to believe that such a place existed before the builders got at it, and it's come to pass that I could easily believe the old park to be almost mythical, a utopian amenity that never actually was. There can be no argument: it had descended into rot, a wide unruly space in the middle of town frequented mainly by winos and pockets of underage and outdoor drinkers. The closure of the pool had been slowly followed by the rusting of the playground, and it became a sour old place. And redevelopment was sadly favoured to restoration. Still, there was no amount of indoor heated pools and hastily constructed small parklands could ever replace it. And you had to stop and wonder how George Bernard felt, having such a fine park named in his honour, and then watching as people got bored with it, and eventually took it away.

Back at Mark's, Amy was putting the finishing touches to a phone call as I pressed the door shut behind me. I followed her into the kitchen, and just about suppressed a smirk as I caught the storm on her face. She flopped dramatically onto a chair. Her temper came from her father, and she had evidently yet to adopt her mother's calculated restraint. The unnecessary cold between she and I had thankfully melted.

'What's the matter with you, girlie?'

I was still naïve enough to believe that if I couldn't fix it, it was damned near unfixable. It was an outdated uncle-niece thing. She wound her face into petulance.

'I want to go out tonight, but I have to babysit that little bitch.'

She didn't bother nodding her head or an outraged finger towards Chloe's room.

'No you don't. I'll do it. And don't call your sister a bitch, bitch.'

Whereas she had vitriolically meant to insult the younger Lacey, I meant only to disable her amusing sibling rivalry through humour. Didn't work.

'You can't. You're going out too.'

It was the first I'd heard of it. Earlier, I might have toyed with the idea of calling Marie straight away, but I had since been distracted.

'What? Where?'

'To dinner. Mum and Dad are taking you out.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'Yeah.'

True to Amy's sullen words, her parents arrived back later that afternoon, interrupting my doze through a rugby league game on *Grandstand*, and outlined our plans for the evening. After a light tea, a shower and a rummage through my clothes for the most respectable among them, I shared the bones of a bottle of wine with Mark as we waited for Janet to ready herself. I mentioned that I had been out to St. Anthony's, though unsuccessfully, which met with a little approval. Chloe moaned about her sister's mood, and forecasted a slave-like existence for the duration of her night under Amy's direct control. This was the cue for Mark to drag the elder girl into the sitting room, and press a glass of meaty Chilean into her hand by means of a peace offering. Her face brightened slightly, and Chloe took the opportunity to have her swear before witnesses that she would allow the screening of a video of her little sister's choice. The subsequent promise probably wasn't worth pennies once we had closed the door behind us, but there was nothing I could do about that.

Janet had booked us into a Japanese restaurant on Tullow Street –Tigro's. It had opened just before Christmas 1999 to rave reviews, and quickly established itself as her favourite place to eat out, on the very rare occasions when she and Mark (or their friends) decided to treat themselves. Despite its unassuming street-front, the interior was laid out elegantly and stylishly; dim yellowing light, hanging lanterns and a tasteful selection of Asian art adorning the walls. Without the lumber of car keys upon his shoulders, Mark was free to assist me in choosing a good red wine to compliment our meal. The grape flowed through bean sprouts in chilli garnish, vegetable starters and into the main course, a teriyaki chicken steak for myself, and seafood dishes for the slightly more adventurous. I could feel my tongue loosening as the meal wore on, the organ working on the sweet spices and the bitter kick of the wine. I firmly believed that the night's intention had not been merely to welcome me back into the home fold after my time away, but also to offer me the relaxed forum in which to explain myself. I knew that they had every right to expect me to fill in the gaping holes that lay after the initial telephone blurt to Mark. And I knew that I was going to have to,

if only to cut short the irritating tip-toe dancing around me that had been going on ever since my arrival. Up until the coming of the baked ice-cream desert, all they knew was that I had spent the past few weeks stumbling around in the ruins of a world that had apparently fallen down around me. Even allowing for politeness and concern, they wanted to know what had caused the topple, and how serious the casualties were.

* * * * *

I have always hated Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. From a child with little or no grasp of the codes of inter-club rivalry through to a supposedly detached sports journalist, their name has always brought with it an iron-like sliver of distaste to the back of my throat, and an ugly scowl to my features. I hated their uselessness. I hated their mid-table mediocrity. I hated that their fat, financially-solvent Cockney fans were satisfied with a top ten finish each year, their decades of obscurity rescued by the occasional appearance in a Cup Final, whether it involved choking against a side their equal, or barely scraping an over-celebrated win over a team they should have beaten handsomely. Europe was a holiday destination as far as these imbeciles were concerned; they would rarely – if ever – have to worry about following the cockerel into European club competitions. Spurs would crawl on their bellies through one season after another, moving through a succession of high-profile managers, big-money has-beens, and the odd gem-like youngster who would rise through the ranks at White Hart Lane, enjoying a certain level of stardom before coming to his agent-coerced senses, and moving on to a real club. Even as a neutral, it disgusted me to see the Hotspur raise their game fervently against the likes of Arsenal, Liverpool or Manchester United, pulling off a victory every now and then, fans and players alike rejoicing as though they themselves had lifted the league title, as opposed to having fingered a minor chink in their opponents' intentions of doing so. That the exact same side would trot out the following week and lose comprehensively to the likes of relegation certainties from Nottingham, Barnsley or Bolton was lost on many thousands of North Londoners. To me, they were a religiously-deluded set-up, their bitterness and misguided grandeurs sourced by the boot-pinching of their over-sized feet.

And in retrospect, it came as no great surprise when I traced the consequential involvement of this detestable entity in the two most significant movements in my personal and professional lives to date. Coincidence, perhaps, but those open to forcing karmic suggestions would have had a field day.

I had been in a cab one evening heading towards the airport en route to Terry Elbiston's stag weekend in Amsterdam when the first domino fell. Terry's best man, Rob Challoner, had executed a routine ticket check, and to my mortification, I found that my passport was missing. I'd spent the previous three days at a seminar in Manchester, and travelled directly to Merton from Victoria Station to meet the others, under the illusion that I'd brought everything I'd need for the weekend. As the others guffawed around me, I called Heather at the apartment, but got no further than the machine. With two good hours of pre-flight boozing set aside, and unsure as to whether or not I would need the damn thing, I decided on safety first, and had the taxi driver drop me off at a rank in Kingston. There was plenty of time to get back to South Beddington, and still make it to Terminal 2 for a pint before boarding.

Having not been at home since leaving for the seminar, I hadn't spoken to Heather for three days, short of a brief and terse call from the hotel which had dragged her from the bath. I would have expected to have found her surprised to hear me barging through the door, sheepish at my error, but cheerful at the prospect of getting a few unexpected minutes with my wife before a boy's weekend away. What I did not expect to find was her semi-naked frozen pose, a cautious and worried statue in the middle of our living room. She was barefoot and topless, wearing only a long cream skirt and a patch of irritated red on her neck, suddenly and shamefully covering herself as Eve in the Garden. The passport was quickly forgotten. Neither of us spoke for seconds on end. It took the sound of a heavy shoe or boot falling to our bedroom floor to puncture the silence. Up to that point, I had been dumbed by the panic in her eyes, muted into fearing that she wasn't simply taking advantage of her privacy to have a pre-shower nude amble around the house. A woman with nothing to hide did not look the way she looked. Or wince the way she did at the noise in the bedroom. My throat was

dry and itchy with the kind of irritation I sometimes get in the centre of my head; unscratchable.

'What's going on, Heather?'

Her eyes flickered shut, and she parted her lips only to exhale. I could feel my fist clenching itself.

'I said, what's going on, Heather?'

She looked palely and pitifully at me, her face somehow looking thinner between curtains of lank and straight tinted brown hair. I took a step around the couch, licking at the droplets of spittle that had turned up on my wobbling lip.

'Who's in the bedroom?'

She moved, letting slip some kind of gulping sound. I paused at the response, her voice weak and submissive.

'Don't go in there.'

'Why not?'

'Just don't.'

I chose to ignore, and strode towards the shut door, feeling her skipping behind me, continuing to implore me pointlessly to stop, yet afraid to reach out with any restraining touch.

The guy was black, barely in his twenties, if that, and hung like a coal Tommy Lee. The shock of discovery was sufficient to leave him paralysed in his confident legs-akimbo splay, before he recovered and reached for a garment to cover his loins. The shirt was white, sporting, bearing – as it draped across his thigh – an inverted cockerel emblem. A Tottenham Hotspur crest. It meant nothing to me at the time, but then again, very little did.

'What's going on, man?'

From his accent, not to mention his clothing, it appeared that the adulterer would have needed every millimetre of his appendage to successfully navigate his way into Heather's knickers. Not the kind of man I could ever remember hearing of her going for.

'I'm her husband, *man*. Get out.'

I held back as much of the trembling rage as I could from my voice. She didn't seem convinced, and spoke with more worry than before.

'Tom, Tom. Don't do anything stupid.'

I didn't bother to turn to address her, but kept my eyes on the young man scrambling off my bed, a football shirt pressed up against his genitals.

'I won't.'

The Spurs fan seemed to sense a little menace in that.

'Hey, you're not gonna thump her, man, are you?'

Surprisingly, thumping her or thumping him had never crossed my mind. It was as though my inner self was conducting itself as calmly as possible in the face of the anger that bubbled somewhere deeper.

'I'm not thumping anybody. Now get out.'

He grabbed an armful of clothes from the floor.

'My clothes, yeah?'

'Take your clothes and get out. You can put them on outside.'

'Outside?'

'Outside.'

I stepped to one side to beckon him out the door. Heather had since started snuffling miserably, lying backwards against the frame. They exchanged nervous and desperate eyes as he passed and shuffled quickly to the front hallway, and out through the front door. I waited until it had shut, and followed without looking sideways at her. She was now crying completely.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to escort our friend to the tube. Is that alright with you?'

She answered with a low moan, and I did not look back as I followed the young black man out into the main corridor of our block.

He was shaking, struggling back into his clothing, and almost fell over as he saw me approaching.

'What...what do you want, man?'

'I want to walk you to the station.'

'The station?'

'Sure.'

I waited until he had uselessly robed himself, and then set off through the building in step with him. Along the way, I promised that if

he ever approached my wife again, I would feed his insides to his family before garrotting each one of them in turn. Doe-eyed, he accepted the pound coin I gave him for his fare, stammering that he did understand what was being demanded of him. Forgetting entirely about the waiting stag crew, I booked into the nearest hotel, and drank myself blind at the bar, incapable of any more.

It seemed only fair that Spurs should have a say in the termination of my marriage, considering they were even more so involved in its conception. During my first year in Croydon, I had been extremely taken with a girl I saw on the tube one Saturday evening, a Spurs fan returning from a routinely successful visit to nearby Selhurst Park, home ground of the local frustration, Crystal Palace. Many years later, I was stunned to find myself being introduced by a mutual friend to a woman who looked uncannily like a naturally aged progression of that striking Spurs fan. And while she was obviously not the same person, it was a conversation starter for five, and a year later, we were married.

* * * * *

‘Tom, I’m so sorry.’

Janet had placed her hand over mine almost as soon as the nakedness had been introduced to my story, and at its end, Mark shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

‘Well, what can you do?’

I shrugged my shoulders, taking the opportunity to slide my hand out from under hers. Mark offered his worth.

‘I assume you’ve left her?’

It seemed banal to me to have to even ask, and I figured banal was the way in which to respond.

‘As much and as completely as a man could ever leave a woman.’

‘So how are you doing?’, asked Janet.

‘I’m alright. I’m better. I know I was a little crazy on the phone, but I had this at the time, and the job thing, and it all got on top of me. But I calmed down pretty quickly.’

Mark was shaking his head.

'I can't believe you were so calm with that guy.'

'I know. I surprised myself.'

'Well, sometimes people do strange things in strange situations', murmured Janet sympathetically. 'I think you handled it as well as you could have.'

After a few minutes lightening the mood, ensuring them that I was coping, the attention moved away from my personal life to my professional, this time Mark leading the way.

'Tell us about the job.'

And even though it was the second of two major blows to hit in the space of a week, this one was a little easier to work back towards. I guess because unlike the first, this was a mistake completely of my own doing, and not an undeserved wrong done to me, its images flickering above my head as my heart was pulled through my chest and trampled underfoot.

'You know, the funny thing is, I've been asked to spare what's left of the newspaper's dignity, and keep it under wraps as much as possible.'

Disappointment fell as a sudden cloud upon the table.

'But hey, why should I start listening to them now, right?'

There was a further pair of uncomfortable shiftings.

'Are you sure?'

'Look, you're family. Screw the paper.'

'Needless to say, it happened after the thing with Heather. I spent a few days staying in the hotel, cooling off. I went back to the apartment when I knew she'd be at work or at night school, picked up whatever I needed and left.'

'So you didn't speak to her at all?'

'No. And I still haven't.'

Janet paused for a second.

'What about... the divorce? If that's what you're getting, that is.'

'I'll do that in time. It's just a formality. There is no piece of legal crap anywhere that tells me I'm still married to her. And it ain't something I'm going to be rushing back into, let me tell you.'

'That's fair enough, I guess.'

And had she been present and lucid enough to do so, my own mother would have cried her eyes out in insisting that it was in the Church's eyes that such a contract existed, and would have to be honoured.

'Anyway, I was sent to cover a press thing at White Hart Lane, about a week later.'

'Tottenham?'

I nodded.

'There were allegations of improper transfer dealings, the club were about to be hauled over the coals by the FA and they set up this shindig to polish their name a little.'

And being the paper's second-to-senior sports writer not on assignment at the time, I was sent along in place of Regis Clairborne, who had sustained a minor back injury at the sixteenth hole at St. Michael's Well.

'What happened?'

'After the statements, the lies and all the face-saving rubbish, the floor was opened for questions. I was in a foul enough state as it was – with the cockerel badge plastered everywhere, I was getting the full benefit of a repeat screening of the guy Heather had been screwing. Anyway, I used what I had in me to come up with a couple of good questions, and tried to get myself in. But being from a two-bit nobody rag like my own, I had a lousy seat, and an even lousier chance of getting heard.'

'Lovely.'

'Yeah. So I took offence to this, interrupted Sugar at one stage, bawled him and the whole assembly out. Contradicted pretty much everything they'd said before that, accused them of the lot.'

Mark let out a long and slow whistle.

'I had to be hauled out by security. Offence number two. So I lashed out at one guy, caught him in the ear, as it happens. It's a good thing the cameras hadn't followed me out, or you'd have seen it with Trevor McDonald.'

I paused for thought as the other two adopted incredulous looks.

'Although, maybe if they had, I wouldn't have copped a hiding.'

Janet's visage fell again to concern.

'You were beaten up?'

I smiled it off.

'My ribs took a little damage. They were careful to not let anything show. It could have been a lot worse.'

'And what happened after that?'

'The book came at me at a hundred miles an hour. Indefinite suspension without pay, a probable sacking at the end of it. No references to show after that, and some pretty poor job prospects to follow.'

'Jesus, Tom, I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. It's my own stupid fault.'

'So what do you do now?'

I took the last of my wine, and stretched back in the chair.

'I lie low like a good little boy. I'm giving the heads in Croydon plenty of time to cool down. If they drag me back in to fire me, so be it. I'll chance my arm in London, for what it's worth. If I have to leave, big deal. It's not exactly my favourite place in the world right now, y'know?'

'Where else would you go?'

'Haven't really thought about it. I might have a look at the market over here, see if Dublin is an option. I have friends across in The Vineyard, I could check out the scene there. It's all up in the air at the moment, so I'm just going to kick back and relax for a while.'

And that was the cue for the cessation of my confessions, and we finished up our meal in flightier spirits. I was happy to have said all that needed to be said, and I was content in having seemingly convinced them that I was doing just fine, all things considered. Janet too appeared to be a little more relaxed in my company, chattering easily and fluently as she drove her sozzled husband and matching brother-in-law home, through streets teeming with merry clubbers and troublesome-looking pockets searching for an opportunity. After shooing Amy off to bed and her furtive texting, she joined Mark and I for a long leisurely Baileys, before deciding to call it a night. Mark produced another collection of beers from the fridge, and we went well into the wee hours, discussing the curious discovery in our old Milford playground, and touching on the precise points of my dilemmas that may well have been inappropriate during our two hours at Tigo's. The exact and updated moral standings of my philandering ex-wife. The steps needed in order

Home

to ensure that she got nothing from the eventual annulment. And the satisfaction I had felt in balling days of searing angry pain into a fist and whaling on the meathead security guard ripping buttons from my shirt.

Home.3

As she slipped back down the hallway that doubled as her studio's outer corridor, the woman caught her reflection in the glassy Edward Hopper on the wall. *Haggard* was the word her dear but dead friend Jessie would have used. Jessie had been a writer, an unpublished and unaccomplished writer, fond of creating elaborate American Civil War landscapes to harbour his flamboyant characters. But for all his commercial failings, Jessie had not been unappreciated or unloved in his art. As a matter of fact, Emma thought his inky sweet-smelling printouts were just about the most moving pieces of scripture she'd ever read. And she had loved to feel his barrel chest swelling and rising as his hairy body shuddered while he read from her dog-eared copies, a pre-breakfast routine on the few occasions when he had stayed over in Pembroke. Unfortunately, those glorious mornings lasted no longer than the brown leaves of that Autumn; as soon as Jessie met the lady from the bank, his interest in staying over with Emma waned, fading to the time when he struggled to make it around on Friday afternoons for their usual socio-analytic chat. Emma secretly wrinkled her nose the first time she saw his new haircut, but he shrugged it off as a present he was making to his new lady friend. And although Emma needed two hands to count the number of changes she noticed in Jessie during the months that followed, she could not remember hearing or seeing of one present given to him by the lady from the bank. And then he was gone, killed by a hit-and-run driver on the new bridge over the Barrow one Sunday evening. Jessie used to go there to stare at the water below, urging the gurgles to soothe his writer's block. Emma consoled herself during the funeral days by insisting that had she and Jessie developed their occasional friendship and ended as lovers, she would have felt an awful lot worse than she did as his friend. She was pretty sure that had she been his girlfriend, she would have gone to his funeral, and cried even more than she did. Then again, maybe the lady from the bank had something more important to do that day, and that was why she didn't join Emma, the priest, and the five nameless others at the drizzly graveside in the shadow of the giant brown box.

If pushed, Emma wouldn't have been able to define haggard, but she thought it had something to do with cronied witches, and knew that it was a perfect fit for her face at that moment. She looked old, worried and

with the weight of somebody else's world upon her thin shoulders. She looked how she felt.

The scratchily elegant handwriting was blatant, as obvious to her as though *he* himself had delivered it to her bedside on foot. She glanced quickly at the stairs as she passed them, wondering if she should give in to the childish instinct to run back under her covers, and write the morning off. There, she would be safe and warm, and a little less apprehensive about opening the envelope gripped in her fingers. But if he was watching, if he saw her giving herself over to cowardice, it would be worse. Unspeakably worse. Though she was terrified, and on the verge of dropping to her knees before she reached the kitchen, she had to claw a respectful air from the depths of her stomach. He would expect nothing less.

She made it into the sun-soaked breakfast room, the room in which only moments earlier she had been nonchalantly sipping sour orange juice, savouring the fruity rockings on the back of her tongue. She sadly concluded that the impending turn of events was hideously unfair. The orange juice moments were being wrenched from her by a redrafted rule book, a set of goalposts moved to evade her net bound shot. Regardless of what was inside the playschool letter, the contact and the reminder was enough. She didn't want to ever hear from him again. She wanted him back in the mire and the forgotten depths of their past. She was willing to leave even the most recent intrusion behind her, the sounds and smells of her crime long since scrubbed from her clothes and her psyche. But with all that had happened in the weeks that followed the nightmarish sequence, it should have come as no great surprise to be hearing from him again. While she had done all he had asked of her, interpreting and acting as she had been intended to, the illusion had been fractured. To nervously assume that he would accept the eventual shortcoming and grant her the peace she craved was nothing short of wishful thinking. And he was categorically opposed to involving himself at the happy end of wishful thinking, hopes or prayers.

Emma slid weakly back onto her chair at the table, and began picking nervously at the sealed envelope. The sticking flap came away easily, yet unable to suggest whether it had provided its own adhesive, or

required the assistance of his mouthy secretions. She tugged the neatly folded sheet from inside, its peach melba colour matching the envelope, the faintest suggestion of perfume lapping at her nostrils. *Fancy pages*, she seemed to remember from somewhere in the well's depth of her mind. The scented traces hinted at a hypnotic reassurance, lulling her into a comfortable position from which to begin. She felt her eyelids drifting together, and the soothing rub of Jessie's dead hand in the centre of her brain. If only it was him. If only it were his words she was holding.

She unfolded the lone document, and instantly counted four blurry paragraphs, one less than before. She squeezed her tired eyes, expelling the tears and offering a little more clarity. The words stopped jumping on the page, and settled down for her to recognise. They were as beautifully drawn as the last time, and she was as lost in their suggestions as she had ever been.

'At the morning's end, she drops wearily to the forest floor, her garments soaked by the dew of exhaustion and accomplishment. With pounding breast and the darkness of wood around her, she is lulled into believing it is evening. Hair curls around her heated face as a comrade, and the leaves wait for her breath to return. But her heart is light with happiness, and her mouth swells gently into a smile as the girl welcomes sleep. Her eyes meet those of nature before closing and taking her into the arms of beauty.

She is woken by the tickle message of a swaying frond, its hairs babbling with the fine dark lines on her bare arm. She draws her tongue along the inside of her lips, dreaming that it was not her own. She stretches, greets the sunlight with wide eyes, surprised that the day is the same, and has not turned. Once the dizzy bemusement passes, she feels the lava of uncertainty in her belly. The day remains. The smiles, the warm heart, the happy relief – all three were cruel teasing elves, leading her by her silken hand to the land of fools. A land from whence she was now flying backwards, towards the fiery and angry dragon's lair of a quest not yet finished.

In time, unnoticed of the new dampness spreading through her underclothes as she sits upright on the cold crippled log, she teaches herself. Of how and why the day was still with her. Of how and why her morning's work fell short of her master's hopes. Of how and why she would be spending the remaining strands of her day, chasing the

falling sun, forced to ally instead with the moon should she run out of hours. In the clearing, she kneads her soft fingers together in her lap, a vision of determined frailty.

With acceptance comes a warm breeze from her nose, heating the tiny nerves on her face. In her mind's eye, she sees that which was broken, and those who broke it. She sees two perfectly matching numbers, and an opportunity singing like the sweetest bird. The breakers become the broken, and the unfinished becomes complete. She eyes the effort and the strain on her limbs, and weighs it all against a good night's sleep, her lord's satisfaction, and the telling of a demon slayer's tale. She curls her soiled and naked feet up under her tattered dress, brings her knees to her chest, and decides.'

It is twenty long minutes before Emma has worn herself out, leaving her with insufficient spirit to continue crying. It is a further five before she can pull herself from the floor, the subsequent cold resting place after her tumble from the chair. She slowly levers her legs into a standing position, and flatfoots her way into the gallery bathroom. Whereas before she might have been haggard, now there was no Jessie-word to cover her crimson eyes, her tear-tracked cheeks and her trembling shoulders. She bothers not to address her appearance; she is still disturbed by the tone of what she has so recently read. He is doing little more than putting on peach melba paper what Emma herself has worried over. He is also concealing answers behind her favourite fantasies, and she knows that it will take her mind to its extremist dimensions to find what he has hidden for her. That chore awaits her, but is one she cannot begin to fathom yet. Now, she is bowling out into the hall, and back up the creaking staircase. She is running into her bedroom, and reaching instantly for the key that will unlock her small wooden locker. She is taking the metal After Eight box from within, and yanking its lid free. She is lifting his first letter from her pile of personal piecements, and swallowing hard. She is slipping the text from the envelope, and reading furtively on her knees. She searches for something, anything. A clause or error or pointer to a part of it that she may have missed at the beginning of this bad real dream. In her jaded and useless state, Emma is foolish enough to momentarily believe that there is such a hope. She doesn't pause to consider what would or could happen if she ever was to find such an anomaly. Had she done so, she would have sadly concluded that there is not a soul or creature on her cruel planet capable of challenging him. Least of all, certainly not a dry-eyed woman propping her crumpled self

against her bed, poring helplessly over perfect calligraphic formations, the story being told as obvious, as clear and as blatant to her as the wobbles in her fingers as she grips the paper. There had been no mistake – not on her part, and not on his. The only interferer had been fate. And now, even though she had lived the lines she was blinking at in her hands, she was going to have to play again. Somehow. It was ten times the worry. And ten times the improbability of running away.

'Alone in the woods, she pauses to bend and dip her fingers into the brook. The cool bubbles send a chill throughout her body, forcing a blanket of goose pimples to attach itself to her skin. She sees his face in the watery silt; having lost him first to love and life, she has now lost him to death. The orderly chaotic routine of the stream is fractured by the primary tear, a thick salty drop that falls from her doe eye as she blinks. The girl looks inwardly at the sudden space in her tired heart, unaware that she is being watched around the corner of a smiling oak tree.

Though he cannot speak to her, he sends his words on a whistling wind. She looks up from the teeming waters, startled by the intrusion, and then by the intruder. She gathers herself in steed to pull her thin frame from the ground, intending to run, but is restrained firmly by the arm that shoots out from behind the tree; through time, distance and the silent air between them. She sinks slowly back onto the turf, instantly recognizing the futility of running. Her head spins in a whirlwind of memories and unfriendly colours. Hypnotized by fear and a blinding white apprehension, she brings her hands to her mouth, drenching her fingers in the newest flow of sadness.

She is dragged roughly through a Bible of pain, through a season never forgotten but scabbed as a wound and covered in cloth. She sobs loudly in the summer light, crying to drown out the miserable thoughts. He implores her to acknowledge where the reflections lie, and how safe they are in there. Behind a wall of tears, she will not bear to think of her sores aired elsewhere, as he numbly suggests. Spoken and read by thousands as they browse the misunderstood life of the girl lying dead and forgotten. Heavy-handed jesters lazily scrawling the sad eulogy of a broken soul they never knew existed.

Moments pass before she realizes that she is on her own once more. Her whimpers stutter to a dry halt, and she rubs the redness into her aching eyes. She cringes while waiting for him to start whispering again, but the only noise is coming from the stream. He has left a flag, a pointer; a body of thought from their past, a stark image

for her to play with. In itself, it is as ghoulish and as terrible now as it was when used as a hanging threat to her childhood. Four dark grins swing murderously, gripping her throat as a work of art, taunting her with the challenge.

She idly cups a handful of water, and lets it slip back through her fingers. Drained by all that has just passed before her, she lowers her head weakly. She is in no position to understand what she has been exposed to, knows only of the past, the present, and a future promised; an apparition from the blackest time of her life, a still from the tallest of bad dreams, and an opportunity to please. She is painfully seized by the wide and breathless possibility, and left to her shivering devices.'

Once before, she had been brilliant, struck by a heavenly intelligence, and pointed towards a venue for her horrible work, and the means by which to come across the materials she would need. She spent days planning, and days carrying out her plans. She moved silently from point to point, gathering that which needed to be gathered, and taking her wares to her new and frightening canvas. She recreated the ghastly setting perfectly, breaking down in tears from time to time, feeling its authenticity rubbing up against the painful memories. Her work done, she left that godless place, rumbling home as a jaded wreck, waiting patiently for the euphoria to follow. Having done all that he had asked of her, she *expected* to be left alone, and left to write off her secretive scramblings against the release in knowing that she was finished with him. However, as the fabric of time unfolded itself over a period of intrusive weeks, she began retreating back into herself, fearing that he would jump heavily back into her life. The art had been taken and broken, and now must surely be fixed. *When it comes again*, she insisted with wringing fingers, *I can run, I will run*. When it came, she did no such thing.

Home.4

Janet had the good sense to leave me and my equally crumpled brother to our Sunday morning whimpers as she woke and readied her daughters for Mass at 11 o'clock. I could hear the splashing, the sighs and the scoldings as three females battled for superiority in the bathroom. I groaned and pulled the light sheets tighter around my surprisingly warm body, ignoring the stench in the room. I had first stirred with the tools of the vineyard's evil ninjas hammering away in my head, and broken flashes of detail from the dreams that had passed. When I'd settled into a semi-comfortable foetal hug, I slipped helplessly back into the trances of the nightmares, remembering more with every passing second. I had been back out in Milford, stepping from the narrow company of the road onto the extended river banks, walking slowly along the worn path towards the water. It was the deadest part of a dead night. There were crop marks in each corner of my eyes, and a cross-hair in the middle, as though I was carrying a camera or recording device in front of me. Perhaps even some kind of weapon. The sound was muffled, and I could feel that my ears were covered. As I neared the thundering wave of the Barrow, passing the old corroded sluice gate on my left, I saw Heather. She was facing me, standing perilously close to where the soil gave way to the current, her arms outstretched, hands upturned in what passed for a martyr's pose. Her nakedness was only heightened by the unfastened gown, a useless cloth implement billowing around her in the breeze. The quiver of the moon on her silken skin could do little with the darkness of her nipples and the familiar clipped triangle above her groin. She gazed directly at me without blinking or speaking long enough for it to feel greasy upon my soul. And then she fell voluntarily backwards, never redrawing her hands to her side, never needing to redress her balance, seemingly trusting of the river's waiting arms. When she hit the surface, the liquid splashed not joyously upwards like water expected, but thickly and nauseously like molten tar. I did not move. Being so near to the edge, there was little more than a brief scramble in the shallowness before she regained enough composure to slink back into a standing position. She was filthy, decked from head to toe in the slick oily garb of the jury. The whites of her eyes flickered quickly, but her face was too sullied for any expression – shock or otherwise – to filter through. Great gobs of deathly slime dripped from the butchered material clinging to her limbs. My line of vision dropped to

the cigarette lighter in my hand, a chunky metal Zippo I recognised as a memento of a passionate weekend in Hamburg. I watched my thumb flipping its lid, and coming to rest on the flint hammer, patiently waiting for the signal. I looked back at the trembling tarred form, tiny against the giant ruined mill on the opposite bank. I realised that by striking down on the lighter and tossing it in her direction, I could expel this wretched woman in flames. I could burn her inexplicable wrong-doing from my equation, provide her with the physical pain to marry the unbindable misery she had visited on me.

I had to turn away from her, even in deciding that I was not staring down the answer. I could not bear to see the moonlight in her eyes dancing sneeringly, taunting me for not even having the cahoonies to do what any man would do. And as I stood with my back to her, I saw the skulls.

The sluice gate sat about ten feet back up the track, seemingly sucking the waters at the edge back up through the land, bringing the river to it to compensate for its own rooted position some distance away. An awkward structure comprising of stone, wood, metal cog work and bars, its weakest component was the frail steel grill that lowered itself into the murky depths of foam. A single wooden sign announced that the area was a wildfowl sanctuary. There was a small canal at the other side – its purpose never properly explained to me, such was its brevity – and the contents of this were slithering reluctantly through the grate and out towards the chunder. And whereas the road-facing side of the working monument housed a user-friendly walkway – allowing access to a tiny island – the rear portion consisted of nothing more than open space. Framed by a stone arch, it offered room for the scared titrations to evaporate into steam if they so chose. And it was in this space that the four grimy heads danced.

The ropes appeared to disappear in through the tops of each skull, allowing them the full range of movement, as opposed to had the attachments been looped through the eye sockets. With the lower jaw missing from all four, they seemed more primate than human, though I knew that this was not the case. The whirls of the gentle wind suddenly ceased, and the dancers began slowing down, unable to sustain

themselves. They came to a stop long before I would have expected. I felt and saw eight demonic hollows fixed on me, as incapable of moving as I was. And then in the darkness of those eight bulbs, I saw the shimmering reflection of my forgotten wife combusting somewhere behind me, an explosion of orange and yellow that should have drawn more reaction from me than it did.

The images were still incredibly vivid as I moved through them in the late morning sunshine, the thin yellow drapes providing little relief from the weather outside. As soon as I heard Mark coughing himself awake, I got up, and washed the illest parts of my hangover from my body. I picked out fresh clothes from my wardrobe, and ambled into the kitchen in time to dozily greet the girls as they returned from church. Janet sarcastically mocked my plight, and informed me that I had missed breakfast, and would have to wait until she had a light lunch on the table. She did this with a smile, not intending to seriously berate me, and quite probably delighted to have had the initial awkwardness and kid glove approach over and done with.

Lunch was a salad, as it was too warm to go bothering cooks. Afterwards, Mark and Janet had a golf date – something he had evidently forgotten, given his throbbing condition. I politely declined their invitation to join them on a four-hour trek in the heat, and settled instead onto the couch for an afternoon of recuperation. Chloe produced a camcorder recording of her school's Christmas pageant, and I sat approvingly through ninety minutes of carols, dancing and a bizarrely blasphemous popstar version of the Nativity.

There were two phone calls while Mark and Janet were out, both answered by Chloe, and both asking for Amy. The first evidently ended in disagreement, as an angrily slammed bedroom door echoed through the house. The second affected her a little less hostilely; she slipped quietly into the sitting room, and looked around. She wore something that could have been worry, puzzlement or a combination of both on her face. At that age, it's sometimes hard to tell.

'What's up?'

'Nothing. Are Mum and Dad back yet?'

I checked my watch.

'No. Give it another hour.'

Chloe didn't look back from queuing up another video for me.

'Who was on the phone?'

Either she hadn't recognised the voice, or wanted to embarrass her sister in front of their uncle.

'Brian's Dad.'

There came a long and suggestive *who* from the entertainment end of the room.

'Who's Brian?'

Amy smiled briefly, one lip side curling slightly before falling back down. I almost didn't need the confirmation.

'Her *boyfriend*.'

I was amused.

'So you have your own bucko? What did his Dad want?'

She glanced quickly towards her sister, lying on her front, legs kicking aimlessly behind her. She then looked back at me. I didn't like her expression. I beckoned her out into the hall, and rose from my carefully-constructed groove.

'What's going on?'

Her frown deepened a little.

'He wanted to know if Brian was with me. He didn't go home last night.'

'Where was he?'

A pause. She looked away before catching my eye.

'At a party.'

'Where?'

'Killeshin.'

I remembered her tantrum from the night before.

'Is this what you wanted to go out for?'

'Yeah.'

'Whose party was it?'

'Some guys from Graigue. It was an outdoor thing, in the forest.'

A penny dropped.

'A rave?'

As far as I knew, they were a thing of the past, at least in Britain. The culture never really recovered from the Criminal Justice Bill and the bad press that surrounded a series of unfortunate incidents.

'Sort of.'

I didn't want to suggest it to my sixteen year old niece, but my immediate response was one of no great surprise. An outdoor dance party, probably going on past sunrise – there could have been revellers *still* at it. This guy could have been so out of it he tried to walk the considerable distance back down the hill and into Carlow. Having said that, I wasn't so keen on the idea of Amy associating herself with anybody capable of that. To say nothing of the thought of her so nearly being a part of the occasion.

'How often do these go on?'

She lifted her eyebrows.

'It's the first one I've heard of.'

So at least it wasn't a regular occurrence. I could see the attraction; bouncers demanding valid ID outside both happening nightclubs in town, not a bouncer in sight in a forest high in the hills.

'Well, I would say 'Hey, he got lucky', but I guess he got lucky already with you.'

She moved quickly past smiling in appreciation to drop and fear the worst of her man. I groaned at the backfiring joke.

'Look, he's probably sleeping it off in someone's house somewhere. These things are the real deal. It's probably still going on now, for God's sake.'

'It's not like him to not call.'

'Does he drink?'

Her cheeks burned a little.

'Yeah.'

'Well, people get forgetful when they're drunk. Or having a good time. He's obviously in for an earful when he gets home, but that's about it. I wouldn't worry.'

'Do you think?'

'I do think'.

'Thanks.'

'No problem'.

She turned and sloped back towards her room. I couldn't help but smile. Young love dragged kicking and screaming into a world of worry. I considered the only possible options available for Amy's Brian, and found myself hoping that the clown had been too drunk (or worse) to call or make his way home. And hoping that she would not be the second Lacey in quick succession to feel the razor's slice of a cheating partner.

From my position back in front of 'Doctor Doolittle', I could hear Mark and Janet arriving home, and the decisive footsteps leading from Amy's room as she moved to intercept them. I gave her some time to pass on the main details, and then made my way into the kitchen. I wanted to reiterate what was my worth, and there was also an air of curiosity in me, wondering how her parents would treat her concern in turn. I bundled apologetically through the door, under the guise of asking how the round had gone, wanting not to embarrass either party.

'How was it?'

'Not bad. Me on top, as usual.'

His spousal bravado did not hide his slight occupancy. So I did the honourable thing, and went with it.

'I'm sure she took it easy on you.'

I flashed a grin at Janet, and her return was weak. To not have been seen to be suspicious at this stage would have been wrong of me.

'Mmmm.'

'Is there something the matter?'

There was the briefest moment between father and daughter, as he apparently checked for her permission.

'It's alright, Dad. He knows.'

'Is this about Brian, yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'What do you think?'

'It's hard to say. He's not the kind of kid to not call in.'

'Come on, Mark. You were that age once. It's probably nothing. He's probably woken up in a gaff somewhere on the other side of Killeshin, wondering how to get home.'

'Killeshin?'

One foot inserted securely in it, and no doubt about it.

'Er, that's where it was, wasn't it?'

Amy's eyes darted to heaven, and she wrung her hands together.

'Amy? What was going on in Killeshin?'

She sighed.

'A dance party.'

'Where in Killeshin?'

'A forest.'

'What?'

On cue, Janet displayed the kind of calm that so often offset her husband's turbulence.

'Does his father know this?'

'Yes. I told him.'

'Right.'

I felt like stepping in, and in the process, accidentally diverted the focus of the conversation completely.

'What's Brian's second name?'

'O'Toole.'

And even though I had spoken to the young man on my last appearance in Carlow, it did not register with me.

'He's Liam's son.'

'What?'

'Liam. Liam O'Toole.'

Liam O'Toole was one of very few people I had remained in contact with over the years, and one of possibly only three I could count as genuine friends in the town. We got together every time I crossed back over the Irish Sea, and exchanged emails and the odd phone call whenever guilt or friendliness touched us. I hadn't, however, been in contact since my brushes with adultery and public disorder.

'No way? You're seeing Liam's kid?'

The surprise I was registering at making the connection between two generations of family and friends deflated the uneasy edge in the sweet-smelling kitchen. Even Amy smiled.

'Yeah.'

'Damn, what a small world.'

Mark practically scoffed.

'It's Carlow, for Christ's sake. Everybody knows everybody.'

'Even still.'

'Do you still hear from Liam?'

'All the time, yeah.'

'Well, do you feel like giving him a call?'

'A call?'

'Try and put this young tearaway's mind at ease.'

He turned to glower mockingly at his daughter.

'Sure, sure. I'll give him a shout, see if Brian's turned up.'

'Although when I've finished with Missy here, she'll be grounded. So maybe he should go back into hiding for a week or two.'

'Why am I being grounded? I didn't do anything!'

'You were planning on going to an illegal dance meeting,

Madam. That's enough for me.'

'But I didn't! You can't punish me for something I didn't do.'

'Watch me.'

And as she stormed out the door with the thunderous clouds of a sulk gathering, I offered her a warm wink, simultaneously promising to do what I could by talking with Liam, and later on, buttering my brother down to seeing a little more leniency regarding her unfair punishment. Good uncles do these things – it's unwritten, but a law.

I tried Liam's number twice, finding it engaged on both occasions. I decided to leave it until after dinner, and sat down to a good feed of creamy pasta carbonara. The mood at the table was a little strange, with Chloe detecting the air and doing her bit to depressurise the room. The gentle reprimands she earned were enough to summon forth a scowling face to match her sister's.

I stretched the cord of the phone to reach in behind the closed door of my guest room, favouring some privacy. Liam picked up on the fourth ring when I tried him again at around seven. He sounded tired, different to the last time we'd spoken, taking advantage of respective slow days at work to discuss the impending Premiership run-in.

'Is that The Tool?'

'Tom? Hey, how are you?'

'I'm fine, I'm good. As well as could be expected back here in the fatherland.'

'You're home? Since when?'

'Just back the night before last, actually.'

'Right. How long are you over for?'

'I'm playing it by ear. A couple of weeks, maybe.'

'Is Heather with you?'

It was a pretty obvious question, and yet it did not stop me from wincing. I forced a little laugh.

'No, she's not. We've separated.'

'What? When?'

'Not very long.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Tom.'

'Hey, how were you supposed to know? Don't worry, we'll get together and I'll tell you all the gruesome details.'

'Sure, sure.'

'Sorry for not getting to you sooner, but my head's been taken up with all this for a while.'

I could have added laziness prior to that excuse, but there was no need. I was repairing the slight damage done as I went, but delaying the inevitability of tapping into his distraction.

'No problem. So how is everything else with you?'

'Good, good. Listen, I have a reason for calling.'

'Yeah?'

'It's about Brian.'

He paused. And it made the asking of my next question unnecessary.

'Go on.'

'Well, I was just wondering if he'd turned up yet? Amy's walking the walls here, waiting for him to call.'

He made a flicking noise with his mouth, and breathed out deeply as he spoke.

'He hasn't come home yet.'

'Oh. Have you heard from him?'

'No.'

It was getting on, and even the most pumping of raves should have spilled its party people back into their menial work week eves. But still, I was not feeling any need for concern. It was unusual, granted, but that was about it. I could think of any one of a number of reasons for the youngster to be incoherently yet to check in at home, and I wondered if Liam could use some of them.

'Is this normal for him?'

'Definitely not. Fi is beside herself, and I'm pretty damn useless myself at the moment.'

There was a resignation to his voice that unsettled me.

'Jesus, Liam, is there anything I can do?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, look, you know where I am if you want me for anything.'

'Thanks.'

He didn't seem to have any great interest in extending the light conversation once it had moved around to the subject of his son, and I was not going to push him.

'I'm sure he'll turn up soon, with some dumb explanation.'

'He'd better.'

Was that anger bubbling through? It was an emotion I would have expected and preferred to have noticed. Then again, desperation sometimes came in other colours.

'Like I say, just shout if you need me, or if you have any news, or anything. OK?'

'OK.'

I returned to the sitting room, and sat through an extended episode of 'Only Fools And Horses', but I was unable to keep my mind from wandering. The mood of those I'd spoken to during the early part of the evening was getting to me. I could not figure out why I wasn't seeing the prolonged absence of Brian O'Toole as such a big deal. Maybe it was because I wasn't a parent, because I was still more than capable of acting like an overgrown eighteen year old, and subsequently looking at things through this younger perspective. The fact that nobody seemed convinced by my words was not lost on me. I thought of my niece in her room and wondered if I would feel any differently if she was missing after a night out. Of course I would; she is a sixteen year old girl. He is a young man, a

year if not two older than her. Still, insisting to myself that it was nothing but a series of over-reactions did nothing for the persistent gnaw at my concentration. I gave it an hour and a half, and considered ringing Liam again. I remembered asking him to call if he had any news, and decided against intruding. And yet not ten minutes later, I was pulling on my jacket, announcing to the others that I was going over to O'Toole's, to see if Brian had showed up.

At the time, I told myself that I was actively addressing the slight nag I had with regard to the situation. Rather than doing anything I could to help, I was more interested in probing, seeking out any information that I might have missed. If talking about it helped Liam out, well then that was a fortunate by-product. But my main goal was trying to figure out if there was any reason for those involved to be so slightly disturbed by what I saw as being no more than a teenager coming home a little late after a pumping night out.

Liam was surprised to see me, but it struggled to get past the weariness on his face. I knew instantly that there had been no good news, if any. We shook hands firmly, and he invited me into his lounge. He excused himself for not showing me into the main sitting room, where his wife Fiona was waiting nervously with a cordless phone and other immediate family. He offered me a drink but I declined. I kicked things off solemnly by asking again if there was anything I could do. He wore a permanent frown, and there was a nervousness in his eyes. Once more, my immediate thought was *over-reaction*.

'Not really, thanks all the same.'

'You know everything about the party, the forest and all that?'

'Yes.'

Dancing around subjects never came easy to me.

'Look, tell me to butt out if you want, but is there something to this that you're not telling me?'

For an instant, I thought I saw fright, but I wrote it off instead as surprise.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you know more than you're letting on?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'Well, I wouldn't have expected you to be this disturbed, that's all.'

He sighed with his stomach, and caved in with very little resistance. I later figured that maybe he needed to tell somebody else, yet needed the smallest of pushes to allow him do so.

'There is more.'

'Go on.'

'I've spoken to some of his mates. They were there. They saw him leaving with a woman, an older woman.'

Amy's face drifted in front of my eyes, and I felt a sudden burning anger outweigh any concern for the boy.

'Do they know who?'

'Yes. Emma Lynskey. She's an artist, has a place in Pembroke.'

'Have you tried contacting her?'

He nodded.

'Yes. Her story is that he left her to try break up a fight between some guy and a girl. She waited in her car for half an hour, but he never showed up.'

I felt bile in the back of my mouth.

'What was she doing with him.'

He visibly shuddered.

'Use your imagination.'

I had been.

'Is she young?'

'No. She's in her forties, I reckon.'

It seemed bizarre in the extreme.

'Forties? What the hell was she doing at a rave?'

'She wasn't at the rave. She was out taking night pictures for a project, somewhere nearby. That part checks out; she has stills on a digital camera with the date and time.'

'How do you know that?'

'I had someone talk to her.'

'Have you been to the police?'

He stifled something as he locked eyes with me.

'No. Fi doesn't want the police involved. Yet. Colin went down, off the record, but not as far as she knew.'

Colin was his slightly older brother, and a Guard as brilliantly odd as any I've ever known or heard of. Pushing towards fifty, he still lived larger than most of those whose neck-scruffs he grabbed, and yet conducted his professional affairs with sufficient authority and dedication to secure a wall full of plaques and commendations. Going off the record in the manner being outlined by Liam didn't seem like something he would willingly do, but then again, when it came to family, I guess the rule books start winging out through most kinds of windows.

'What did he get?'

'Just what I've told you. She was with him, but he disappeared. She didn't recognise the two arguing, or remember much of their faces.'

'What does Col think of her story?'

'He believes her. So do I.'

'Does Fi know all this?'

He looked towards the door.

'No. There's nothing concrete to know yet.'

Now, I was starting to feel a little of the gathering worry that I had seen all around me.

'What are you thinking?'

'I'm thinking that it involves the two fighting. I've been up to where she described leaving him, but there's nothing. No signs.'

'Jesus.'

'And I don't know if it's anything to do with the Milford thing.'

'Huh?'

He paused to mesh the fattest parts of his face in circles with his hands, leaving dark red traces on his cheeks.

'You didn't hear about that?'

Of course I'd heard about a Milford *thing*. But I hadn't heard of any connection or link to this. So it appeared to him that I'd heard nothing.

'Milford?'

'He and some others found skulls out on the river.'

I could not believe that I had read his name three or four times in the various different articles, and been too caught up in the location to not realise that it could even have been Liam's kid involved. I rubbed my hand over the top of my head, feeling my features freeze in mild shock.

'Hold on a minute; *Brian* was one of those guys?'

Liam's mouth hardened in a frank grimace.

'Yeah. And I can't help wondering if this has something to do with it.'

I was momentarily too busy with what I had just learned to clock that I didn't agree with him. It came eventually.

'You think that the woman and the fighting couple are involved with that?'

'Maybe not the woman. Maybe not even the couple. I don't know. And that's the worst part.'

I eased myself back from the edge of my armchair into the scarlet velvet depths and breathed out.

'You're going to have to tell the police.'

He was firm.

'I'm giving it until tomorrow morning.'

'What if that's too late?'

His retort reeked of unclear despair, and my heart went out to him.

'Too late for what?'

I couldn't come back from that, short of lowering my eyes and sucking thoughtfully on my lip. He seemed to become restless, quite possibly wanting to get back to his wife. Maybe Colin was in there too.

'Look, I'm going to head off. But you have Mark's number. Give me a call at any time if you want me. If you need me to go out looking with you, or if you need me to talk to people, just ask. I'm here for you.'

He rose from his chair, and extended his hand again. It wobbled a little.

'I appreciate that. And I will take you up on it.'

'Do that.'

He let me out into the quiet night air, and shut the door behind me without another word. I got back into the car, and set off on the light-headed five minute drive home, feeling the worry of my immediate peers descend on me like mist. I felt my airways tighten as I sketched mental images of the players and watchers in the drama, and willingly inked

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myself into the landscape. Skulls in Milford, a missing boy, and an ominous air that wasn't being explained to me. The twin hooks of past memories and people affected were in my skin, and I ruefully accepted my position. It was sickly strange to be considering these strains as I drove through the sweaty outskirts roads of my small hometown, and I bounced joylessly backwards to the debate I'd had with an old friend in Brookes' café bar the previous day. And how I had compared these streets to a child.

At a rate quicker than I had bitterly tracked, she was growing up. Taking with her all the baggage that came with such growth. Taking the nerves, the pain and the anguish of all those touched by what now went on under her wings. And as a consequence of my apparent involvement, taking me.

Home.5

I woke late the next morning, thickly and groggily from a deep and dreamless sleep. Before dressing myself, I stumbled into the kitchen, and asked if there had been any news from O'Toole's. Janet shook her head blankly, and offered a godly prayer for his safe delivery home. Having expected no better, I trooped back to my room, showered, shaved, and threw on some clothes. I shared very little with her as I ate breakfast under her eye, respecting Liam's unspoken but obvious need for privacy.

At eleven, I announced that I was going to go and try checking in with the folks again, and turned down Janet's ensuing offer of a lift. It was a glorious morning, so I wasn't shirking at the walk. Besides, I had plenty with which to occupy my mind, and sitting in an overheating car with her generous intentions was not going to help. The time and space to sift through things at my own pace were two items definitely on my agenda.

If asked at any stage during my journey to Ireland from England what I expected to be occupying my mind with while kicking back, I would have understandably pointed at the two happenings I was running miserably away from. Within two days, Heather and the suits at the paper were bumped considerably down the queue, and it was not with happier thoughts that they were being replaced. I tracked my own wonder and fears for the missing boy, and winced painfully to fathom how Liam must be feeling. It was a horrible thought. Mixed in with the eerie images of a midnight skull find, and the unsettling suggestions I could see in the realms of a forest rave, it was something too strange and too confused for the setting. Then again, having been away for so long, I figured I had no real grasp on where the redrawn borders of bad reality lay in my swelling birth town.

I reached St. Anthony's in good time, and approached the reception desk with a nervy smile. The building was modern and bright, its cheery interior a blend of clean windows and warm varnished pine. A couple of old souls were dotted around the foyer area, sitting in armchairs or their own wheeled devices. The local radio station was babbling away to itself through small Bose speakers pinned high in opposite corners. The

receptionist picked up a phone to speak to one of her colleagues, and shortly after, a tall and bony nurse strode down the eastern corridor, and introduced herself as Eva. Dispensing with the polite formalities almost straight away, she informed me that my mother was having a slow morning, and not in the best of form. She began moving back down along the hallway, and asked how long it was since I had seen either. I sidestepped the shameful honesty by saying it had been a while.

I was led into a small room, soaked in the sunshine coming through a blindless window. My mother was sitting upright on one of two single beds, narrow eyes focused on the invaders of her privacy. Her lips trembled a little, and she kneaded her hands together in her lap. Following the movement of her arms, I traced the outline of the lime green cardigan she wore. And in an instant, through pausing to realise that I didn't know where she now got her clothes from, I felt an explosion of guilt, panic and pity in my chest. Rooted to the spot, I could do little to address the surge, and concentrated instead on listening to the words the nurse was using to placate the irritated woman.

'That's a fine puss, now isn't it? And me bringing you a visitor.'

My mother peered around the corner of the scolding beanpole, as if she hadn't registered the second person, and wanted to get a good look. Her expression didn't change as our eyes met, mine reluctant.

'Tom is here to see how you're doing.'

And then she turned away, in a childlike huff.

'That's nice of him.'

'Come on now. He's come all the way from England.'

She remained swivelled sideways, but cocked the corner of one eye back across. Her voice was surprisingly firm.

'So that's why he hasn't been around.'

'Oh, you remember that, don't you?'

I was taken aback by the notion that she remembered this much, and also by the way in which she was apparently sulking at me. It was too surreal in a day that was already brimming with tension, unrest and all that goodness.

Eva turned to me, and muttered out the side of her mouth.

'It comes and goes like that.'

'Huh?'

'The memory. It doesn't help that she plays around with it when it suits her.'

'Oh.'

'His nibs is in his bath at the moment, he'll be in shortly.'

'Grand.'

I was still too caught in the moment to offer any more than basic responses. She was now moving back out through the door, telling me wryly that she was leaving me to it. I suddenly understood that I was about to be alone in the sunny room with my mother, who seemed as happy to see me as I was comfortable in being there. Regardless, I had to get it together, for the sake of averting disaster. The door was left ajar behind me, with no shutting sound to signal the start of my effort. Instead, I picked a point and went with it. I worked the bravest smile I could muster, and moved slowly around to face her.

In retrospect, it could have been a lot worse. I talked incessantly, feeling the need to fill each and every silent space in the morning air, to win whatever I could by bombarding her with pleasant information. I spoke more in the manner of a television newscaster than anything else, wary of asking her any questions, for fear of seeing her confuse and contort herself in not knowing the answers. I could guess from her manner that she believed two or three months had passed since my previous visit, and not instead 12 times the truth. I was not going to correct her. I spoke of my job, life in London, Mark and the girls, anything I could pull at. She amazed me by remembering enough to ask about 'the English girl', but seemingly forgetting that we had been married. I responded cautiously by chattering about our union, stopping short of that which followed the occasion of my aborted involvement in Terry Elbiston's stag weekend. I gave her the opportunity to complain about her husband, the food at the home, and the way the weather turned in the gardens outside her window. It was something of a breathless encounter – I intended fiercely to remain engaged by either what I or she was saying, denying myself the opportunity to slip back into the medicine of emotions that gargled away somewhere in the pit of my stomach.

She had aged naturally, fine lines now outlining each of her facial features, with matching plough marks across the field of her forehead. Her hair was wisplike, a tawny cotton film springing from her skull. She caught me gazing at her shaking fingers from time to time, and balled them into a defiantly embarrassed fist before reprimanding me with her eyes. They were as soft as ever, burning lamps shooting back twenty years in ways no other part of her could.

I don't know if it was as a consequence of being absent for so long, but the effort I was determined to put in made things an awful lot easier on me that sunny morning. Maybe I had caught her on a good day, despite what the tall thin Eva had said. Maybe I was reaping the fruits of the busy nature I had employed in attempting to curb the kind of frustration I'd known on occasions in the past. Whatever it was, the fuel that carried me through a constant flow of light banter was shielding me effectively from the stores of sadness-tinged feelings. I was too busy to address how I really felt.

It was a lot more difficult to hide from the squall of discomfort that was born when my father entered the room, slow-footed and guided by another youngish nurse. The first thing I noticed was his still-wet hair, the grey darkened almost to black by the damp, clinging in places to the bones of his head. His face was sunken and sad, weakened by time and the battles he fought with himself, his wife, and anybody else around him. He shuffled as he moved, his limbs swinging blankly like some kind of aged robot. If he recognised me, he wasn't showing it. He seemed too weary to care; I couldn't bear to think of his slow apathy as a reflex reaction to knowing that I hadn't been to see them in so long.

After the awkward formalities, I went back over a lot of what I had shared with Mother, giving her the chance to fill out the spaces left in conversation, as she contentedly felt at ease with the recent subject matter. He was polite, but no more. He answered questions as they were asked, shortly and concisely. He shied away from asking me anything in turn. I caught him exchanging looks with Mother from time to time, but sadly read nothing I could recognise in either set of eyes. It didn't take all that long for me to realise that I was floundering, and I decided to abandon ship before I began drowning. They may have been tears, they

may have been angry minions – it could even have been confusion at seeing them stronger than I had anticipated – but something was clawing at my throat, and I preferred to address them on my own time.

I left with as little fuss as possible, promising to pop back in over the coming days. She may well have tried to reach for me in saying goodbye, but I didn't give her the chance, sidling towards the door as soon as the words had left my mouth. I braved a smile, ignored the surprised look on her face, and had not the nerve to look for his as I slid back out into the corridor.

I deserved every millisecond of those horrible few minutes, and then some. I had been categorically fortunate in finding my mother as I had found her, our reunion a mouldable piece of clay, something I could train as I wanted to. With him, there was no such option. He was giving me what I was supposed to get. And the brief misguided relief of her demeanour had done nothing more than temporarily delude and distract me from the truth. I had gone about all this in the worst possible way.

Somewhere in amongst the turbulences that had formed, I was also feeling sorry for myself. As I stepped back out into the heavy sunshine, I added this latest setback to the growing bundle of grievances and incidence that I was facing. I don't know if I had intended for the re-establishment of contact with my parents to soothe whatever conscience I had buried down. I knew that there was no way I could spend any length of time back home and not check in with them, regardless of how I had neglected them lately. I guess I must have hoped that it could have gone a little better. For all three of us.

I walked slowly along the shaded leafy roads, ambling absentmindedly back towards the centre of town, thinking. I passed The Old Pumphouse on the way, and thought long and hard about slipping in for a couple of large ones, to calm myself. As the sun overhead was somewhere around the mid-day mark, I decided against it, and instead bought some lunch, and picked at it on a dilapidated bench by the Town Hall car park. A group of kids were doing their best to playfully terrorise four swans - brief migrators from the river- obviously

innocently oblivious to the vicious bites the birds were capable of when pushed. As with any kind of dilemma, I found myself tying my guilt to the persisting issues of the time – namely an ex-wife and an ex-job – and exaggerating the bundle to migraine proportions. Time to put it all aside.

In attempting to focus on the wayward children, I found my mind wandering to consider Liam's present situation, and as always, I turned on myself in disgust. Heather was finished, though I had not brought that upon myself. The job development had been my own doing, and would sort itself out in time, one way or another. The distance between my parents and I was also my own doing. Forgetting my own stupidity, I had little to complain about. I wasn't facing having to ask for police assistance in tracking down my missing son. I wasn't living the burning worry of a parent not knowing why, how or where my child is. I really had nothing in comparison to complain about. And I would surely be better served directing whatever I had in me to hoping for the safe return of Brian O'Toole.

Once the kids had moved on, my eyes dropped towards the lazy water of the Barrow, and I disappeared into my thoughts once more. From what he had said the night before, there was every chance that Liam had been to see the Guards. I wasn't sure how long needed to pass before people were officially classed as missing – it might have been three days, maybe less for a child. I thought of the woman, and the couple who had been arguing, and how – if at all – they were connected. I wondered if the police would be able to track down the fighting couple, and if they would be able to shed any light on Brian's whereabouts. I suddenly felt overwhelmingly useless, having all these questions, yet unable to offer anything. Through my involvement as a good friend, I was like a slipshod detective in a cheap movie, the comic interest, useless. Already appalled by the selfish nature of my naval introspection, I began to feel heated in my skin. A dramatic clown feeling sorry for himself, incapable of being any use whatsoever to a friend in need. A friend indeed.

It was quite possibly an incredibly stupid thing to do, an action that could have jeopardised any legal proceedings that may have materialised. But that never happened, though I never stopped to consider it, so take the two negatives, and as far as I'm concerned, it's permissible.

I remembered the woman's name. Emma Lynskey. I remembered this much because I had never shaken the memory of a bloodied hurler from Galway battling on bravely in an All Ireland Final during the 1980's, and his name had been Brendan Lynskey. I remembered that she had been an artist, because Janet had left something in my brain about art classes. I remembered that she had a studio in Pembroke, because any time I had the freedom to take a homebound ferry instead of a flight, I left from Pembroke in Wales. Hence, through a muddled glut of references, I knew the woman's name, and possibly where to find her. I also knew that my feet were suddenly striding back up through Castle Hill, past where the old dairy used to be, replaced now by a high-tech trinket shop. I wasn't sure if I was explosively heading towards Emma Lynskey's studio as a casual customer, one capable of dropping small talk lines about the shocking missing boy story that had leaked from the barracks. Maybe I was going there as Tom Lacey, the misguided hapless laugh-getting detective. Whatever, I was on my way, and I was going there to talk to Emma Lynskey. It was an instant and boorish retort to feeling as useless as I did, and quite possibly no more.

I've never quite figured out exactly what Pembroke is, or rather if it is anything more than one cul-de-sac street. It is arrow-straight, a turn to the left as one approaches the Post Office at the junction of Kennedy Avenue and Dublin Street. There are two lines of terraced houses, a gloomy seed mill, a dentist's office, and at the very end, a large trucking yard. Though nobody has ever been able to confirm it, my suspicion is that 'Pembroke' is but a nickname given to the street, in honour of Brian Kehoe's trucking company. Given that the fleet of red and black Scania's pour through the ferry ports of Europe on a regular basis, it is not unreasonable to suggest that some wag saw fit to christen the area after its Welsh harbour counterpart. Of course, there are more glamorous place names to work from, but maybe somebody had a soft spot for Wales. Just a theory.

The studio was roughly fifty yards from the top of the street, announced by a wooden carving of an easel, engraved with 'Marble Arch Studios'. I could see no marble, and certainly no arch, but maybe there was something inside to that effect. It was little more than a converted detached two-storey house, with an additional porch acting as a small

lobby. The door was open, so I walked in, almost bumping off an oak table laden with colourful pamphlets and brochures. As I moved into a bright and spacious room, my eye was caught by the huge canvas painting hanging on the far wall. It was dark, a heaving mass of purple and charcoal, like a black hole imploding towards something even more hopeless. The painting commanded most of the wall, which was broken in places by small and neat metal spotlights. The room itself was happy: nicely varnished floor, a soft yellow covering on the walls, and a tall ceiling finished in white with ornate plaster patterns surrounding the unused overhead lights. The tone and mood of the furnishings would prove to be at odds with the work portrayed in the oils, watercolours and sculptures displayed commercially throughout. As I glanced from piece to piece, the immediate word that came to mind was dark. Dark art. Depictions and suggestions of despair, hurt and discontent. Absolutely nothing in the way of flattering portraits, sleepy countryside settings, or pleasant public gatherings of people. And while the overall feeling was one of unsettled ease, I was completely drawn. Everything I looked at was excellent in its own way. In the moments spent spinning around catching each segment of work, I became submerged in the insistence of the artist, and almost forgot why I had first stepped into that crazily alluring studio.

When she appeared in the doorway, I reluctantly tore my eyes away from the painting I had been glued to. Entitled 'Never Dreamt', it could have been any one of a number of things. A frail figure moving from darkness into an obvious evil light. A glowering entity drifting down onto a waiting sleeper. An unintended pool of dawn resources, the reds by no means as assuring as they are at any other time of day.

She was about my height, wearing a black top and trousers, with pale skin offset by her lips. Her hair was ashy blonde, with possibly a little more life than most women would prefer. She offered me a shy smile, and ghosted back around the corner of the doorframe. I thought that she looked like an Emma, for what little it was worth. More importantly, she looked like somebody capable of creating these works on the walls. I coughed, surprised at the level of echo, and sent 'Excuse me' by means of a query. She walked back out from wherever she had been, and came slowly towards me. Her cheeks had adopted a quick pink blush, and her smile was just as shy as the first. I realised that I had not a clue what I was

doing there. In an instant, playing on the interested art consumer role seemed like the best option available. But that ultimately wouldn't help anybody.

She stopped when she was within three paces of me. There was a tired warmth to her features, as though she was forcing a little extra friendliness in the hope of making a sale. I noticed that she had a small black mole above one lip, so tiny that it could have been dotted in with one gentle stab of a felt-tip pen. She looked younger than Liam's estimate of somewhere in her forties.

'What can I do for you?'

The eyes and the soft feminine tone suggested awkwardness, and she struck me as a woman definitely uncomfortable with selling herself. Again, I questioned my presence there, but somehow, aborting the ham fists never presented itself as an option. I had been stupid in getting myself to a place in which I felt as though I had to do something useful, and now arrived, I was continuing the stupid theme. Too late for anything else.

'Is it OK if I ask you a couple of questions?'

'Sure.'

The slightly prolonged pronunciation let slip that she was anything but. So she did a little digging of her own.

'What about?'

I paused. I hadn't bothered trying to prepare my words. Foolish.

'Let me explain. A boy went missing on Saturday night, from a rave in Killeshin. I believe you were helping the police with their inquiries?'

I almost winced, knowing that I was instantly opening a can of worms, her interest in a teenage boy wriggling alongside her placement as a key witness to whatever had happened. And the words I had used were awful. In my line of work, genuine interviews came thin and slow, and as such I had the skills of a imbecile. An unrecognisable flame flashed in her eyes, and she made a thoughtful circle of her mouth. And replied quietly.

'Are you with the police?'

I shifted nervously, sensing the full stupidity of my bungle approaching.

'No, I'm not.'

'What are you? An investigator?'

'No. To be honest, I'm just a good friend of the man whose son is missing. I'm not a Guard, I'm not investigating. I'm actually a journalist.'

'Journalist?'

'Sports. But that's got nothing to do with this. I'm not writing anything. I'm just trying to help out, do what I can.'

'What's your name?'

I couldn't believe I had jumped in without introducing myself. A real comic strip hero.

'I'm sorry, I'm Tom Lacey.'

We shook hands quickly and formally as she confirmed that her name was Emma Lynskey. It struck me: what if she shared the studio with a friend, and I had been making my clumsy inquiries of the wrong person? How fine would that have been?

'Well, Mr. Lacey, it's good of you to want to help. But I have told the police everything I know, and it is really very little.'

I couldn't be sure if she was patronising me or not.

'I know. But I can't help worrying that maybe they've missed something.'

She offered me a deserved look of incredulous tact.

'The police?'

Fair point.

'I know. And I understand if you don't want to answer my questions. But I would really appreciate a few minutes of your time, Miss Lynskey, if you could spare them.'

It was her turn to pause, and look away.

'He's still missing, isn't he?'

'Yes.'

It seemed like a needless question; why would I be there in the first place if the boy had arrived home, safe and sound? Maybe she was simply justifying putting herself through the nuisance again. Whatever, she gave me what I wanted, regardless of what I could do with it.

‘What do you want to know?’

She took me into a warm and fragrant kitchen at the back of her house. I turned down her offer of coffee, but gladly accepted a glass of carton-fresh orange juice. We went back over everything I already knew. She had been in the hills, taking photographs as research for a project she was only half-considering undertaking. She would not go into specifics, but mentioned as an aside that it would involve humanising trees. I didn’t have to ask to see the digital images, as she disappeared at one point, and returned with a heavy grey Nikon camera. She showed me how to move through the snapshots on the small LCD screen, and also how to display the date and time details. The gallery was exactly as she had said it would be; spans of forest, old stumps, and a sky that darkened from pink to purple to black. As I stopped to consider the final picture on the camera’s hard drive, she drifted a thin finger over my arm, and tapped on the screen, causing a watery splash of rainbow colours to temporarily distort the landscape. Her scent infused me, dropping me instantly into a trance. Was this how Brian had been hooked?

‘That’s where I last saw the boy.’

I waited for the swelling to settle before bringing the tiny image closer to my eyes.

‘Here?’

It was the mouth of a forest, early evening. There was a huge log gate blocking the rough road, the kind that seemed to block forest entrances all over the world. The wide dirt track climbed slowly between dark clusters of trees before slithering around a corner to the right. There was a sign of some sort on the gate, but I couldn’t make out its markings. There were a number of etches in the reddish-brown earth around the trees to the right of the barrier – animal tracks, perhaps, made as they scrambled up the incline into the pine needle flecks of the woodland floor.

‘Yes. My car was about a hundred yards away, pulled in off the road. We were on our way back there when he noticed the man and woman fighting.’

I didn’t look up from the camera. As she drew back, so did her hold.

‘Where in relation to this?’

The way I was going, I could end up in the hills, sniffing around the forest mouth myself. More idiotic super-sleuth nonsense, but I wasn't really processing anything correctly at that stage.

'Just down to the left.'

I handed the impressive gadget back to her, and smiled my thanks.

'And you can't give any description of the man and woman?'

She shook her head again, and gave a wry smirk.

'Nothing of any use. He was tall, with a close haircut. A tight black T-shirt, and dark jeans. She was all in white, maybe a leather skirt. Too much makeup.'

I assumed that Colin and Liam had this much, but I memorised what I could, in case. I needed room for the nerve to go where I was going next.

'What were you doing with the boy in the first place?'

I left Brian's name out of it to make things a little easier on her. She didn't strike me as someone undeserving of decency. Whatever she was into was none of my business. I was only interested in the missing-boy part of the story. It took two to tango; I wasn't going to come down on her for taking my niece's boyfriend for a ride. It was something I'd rather take up with him.

Her eyes fell to the floor, and she squeezed herself onto a chair at the kitchen table. She looked up at me with a strange expression dominating her face. I could not place it.

'You won't believe it, but I wanted him for the project I told you about.'

'Go on.'

'Well, I got involved with what I was doing, and needed the next step. I needed human input. I drove around for a while, thinking. I saw the lights, and went to take a look. We got talking, and I asked him if he was interested in helping me out. I said I'd pay him.'

'He bought it?'

She dropped her face again, perhaps ashamedly so.

'I think he thought I meant something else.'

I could have pushed, but I could see how she was squirming, and I preferred believing what she was saying.

'OK. And then he went to break up the fight.'

'Well, they were more arguing than fighting.'

'You could see them all the time?'

'No. The woman kept moving away, like she didn't want to hear. The other two followed her. Pretty soon they were in the darkness.'

'You didn't follow?'

'No. I stood waiting by the gate. I didn't want to get involved. I'm nervous about that kind of thing.'

'Right. How long did you wait?'

'A couple of minutes. Then another half an hour in the car. I'd told him where it was, so I hoped he'd come after me.'

'And what did you do when he didn't?'

'I came home.'

'You didn't think of telling the police?'

She looked surprised.

'Why would I? It's none of my business. For all I knew, maybe he went off with that woman. Maybe he got high with the man. Maybe he was suspicious of me.'

'Maybe something happened to him.'

She drooped her head slightly. And whispered.

'Maybe.'

Having brought the harshest reality of the development to the table, there was nowhere else I could go. I was very new to this game, and evidently not very good. I thanked Emma Lynskey profusely for her time, admitting that she had at the very least put my mind at ease. She offered her own hopes for the happy return of the boy, and was good enough to ask that she be informed if and when the mystery was solved. We walked back out through the magnetic studio room, and shook farewell hands in the small lobby area. As I strolled down the path through her tidy garden, I was surprised to hear the door click shut behind me – it had been open when I arrived. It was followed by the sound of a lock being played with, and the sound of somebody who did not want to be disturbed in a hurry. After my *Tom Lacey – Private Dick* intrusion, I guess I could sympathise with that.

Home.6

On Tuesday, I was shaken from sleep by a knock on the guest room door just shy of ten bells, and the caustic disapproving tones of Janet informing that there was a woman on the phone asking for me. In knocking the dull slumber from my frame, I came around to taking the slightest offence. If she meant to suggest that I was out ploughing the fields so soon after the implosion of my marriage – something I had played no part in – then she was as far off the mark as she could have been. Instantly, I curdled in wondering if it was Heather making an attempt to reach me for some reason. I pulled yesterday's T-shirt down over my trunk, and bounded out into the hall. There was a disguised smirk pulling up at the corners of Janet's mouth, and yet some kind of worry-wonder mix in her eyes. I took care to not breath on her as I spoke.

'Who is it?'

'A Marie Prendergast.'

It took a moment to remember Saturday's reunion in the library, and the storytelling in Brookes' café bar. I could have deflected Janet's strangeness if I had so chosen with a mumble about *going way back, a friend of Mark's and mine*, but that would have opened a whole new box of Janet questions, so I left it.

'Ah, Marie. Thanks.'

I edged past her and reached for the receiver where it lay on the mean and uncomfortable phone seat. Narrow and hard, to dissuade extended conversations. I covered the mouth end with my hand, and turned to apologise for the call waking the house, if it had done so. Janet smiled and shook her head, disappearing into the oak shadows of the master bedroom, pretending to not be interested. I raised the phone to my ear, and exchanged the formal pleasantries. It hadn't occurred to me that I'd not given her a contact number for myself.

'I hope you don't mind, I got the number of the house from the book. You never left me a mobile or anything.'

'Sorry about that. I had intended to give you a call later in the week.'

'No, no, it's not about that. I'm out on the road today, and I thought of you.'

I perked.

'Go on.'

'Well, would I be right in saying that you had more than a little interest in that business in Milford?'

'Business?'

I'd said it without first registering what she'd meant.

'The kids and the skulls.'

'Ah yes. Yes, it seemed a little strange, that's all.'

'I wasn't sure now if I'd picked that up or not, and I hope I'm not wasting your time.'

Interested, but puzzled.

'With what, Marie?'

'Let me explain. I'm down to Waterford this morning, and I'm meeting a girl I lived with in college. You might have met her. Jane Carroll. She's a consulting psychologist, she works with the Guards from time to time. She specialises in the occult, and she's doing some work on the Milford thing. I know that there's a lot she won't be able to say, but she's sound, she'll answer whatever she can for you. If you're interested, you can tag along with me.'

Ordinarily, it would have tired me just listening to her breakneck delivery, let alone what it must have felt like to give it. But there was something in the storm of flickering images and questions in my head demanding all of my sleepy attention. And I didn't know the name.

'God, thanks for thinking of me, Marie. I'd be interested enough in seeing what she has to say.'

'Right so, that's settled. I'll be pulling up outside your door in half an hour. Get yourself ready, because I'm on a fairly tight schedule.'

'No problem at all, Marie, I'll be ready.'

She signed off with a brisk efficiency, and I stood for a second scratching the back of my neck with one bare foot toasting gently in the hallway's sole rays of sunlight. A clatter in one of the rooms shook me back from the brief paralysis, and I walked quickly back into my chamber, wondering how now I was going to tell Janet – with a straight face – that I was off for the day with another woman. It amused me because it was perfectly innocent – for now. It amused me that it didn't her. But pausing to consider the reason for travelling to Waterford with Marie Prendergast brought with it a swirl of excited expectancy, and the promise of some answers to the questions I had regarding the oddity in my Milford.

And it would be ten minutes yet before I remembered anything about Liam's boy, my interview with the artist, or anything else that had happened in those few days that didn't belong in a backwater.

As it turned out, if Janet was in any way perturbed by my plans for the day, she didn't show it. She asked politely if I expected to be home in time for dinner, and I offered to ring at an appropriate hour with a definite answer. I felt a little bad for being so ready to rejoice in her frown, but that melted like a summer snowflake once I had taken my seat in Marie's '00 Mondeo. My senses were at once assaulted by the insistent fumes of whatever it was she wore, and the sight of a woman in her most powerful suit, made up as someone who would not be entertaining the word 'no' at any point during the day. As I buckled my seatbelt, I smirked at the rarely-mentioned weapon of a well-dressed woman who *knows* it. I buried the smirk in a rub of my chin on my shoulder; that day, Marie looked for all the world like someone who would sue at the suggestion.

On the way down, she spoke at length of her work, and her reasons for being in Waterford at that time. There was another super-ultra-motorway in the pipeline, and a thousand things to iron out. Irate farmers, worried villagers, and two 'sizeable' big-name issues she could not tell me about. I wasn't that bothered. As long as it kept her away from asking about my career, it was all good. When she did get around to it, I rattled off a couple of well-sold freelance articles, the particulars of my most triumphant few months at the newspaper, and also a fictitious book I was working on, its subject matter being the very first thing that came to mind – sports agents and their beautiful cuts. As we left County Kilkenny behind, she moved on to a high-profile case that Jane Carroll had been involved with: apparently, a daughter of a prominent politician – his name meant little to me, as blissfully ignorant as I was of the modern Irish political zoo – had inked a lucrative scholarship deal with a New York art house. Three of her old Dublin classmates – in believing that the undeserving Miss Silver-Spoon had enjoyed the benefits of Daddy's pull on some Irish-American business alliance – had lifted a number of her works from her Malahide home, jealously daubed them with crude occult symbols, and hung them on display in the college gallery. There was a brief scaremongering flurry of fear, given the nature of the vandalism – hence Jane Carroll's short and ultimately needless consultation.

The plan was thus: Marie would leave me to amuse myself in the city for a couple of hours, and then take advantage of the generous council lunch break to co-ordinate our little get-together. She dropped me pretty centrally, minutes away from the impressive new town square arrangement. The stylish pedestrian layout was light years away from the dreary old port town I'd known as a younger man. I spent a while checking out the side streets before heading back down towards the quays. The Barrow was wide and deep enough at this stage to harbour huge cargo ships, though none were currently moored in sight. Across the water, the Ard Rí hotel sat regally and pompously, high on the hill with a handful of skeletal electricity pylons for company. For some reason, this particular haunt had been a religious stop on the annual parish alter boy summer tours: every year, we knew what to expect – the funnest two priests and a half dozen volunteer parents, a meal in the Ard Rí hotel in Waterford, and the bones of three hours to run amok on the amusements in Tramore, a seaside resort ten miles down on the coast. And every year of the six I'd been around for, it was the same meal – two sausages, chips, beans, and weak diluted orange. The most memorable aspects of the hour in Waterford were the silver bowls of vinegar on every table (we were expected to *spoon* the stuff onto our food), and the round tower away in the fields behind the hotel. Only the bravest and hardest boys would risk the wrath of the supervisors by breaking from the post-lunch car park antics and heading for the tower. Mark and I had never been so bold. Looking up at the hilltop, I felt a breeze of nostalgia, and a sudden urge for a plate of their finest child's fare. With a silver bowl of vinegar on the side. I wondered if the Askea Parish alter boys (and girls, now that the Church had hauled its lumbering frame from the Dark Ages) were still being treated to the faithful old ways.

I followed the river for a while, becoming intrigued by a development of apartments that seemed to hang out over the murky water. Soon enough, I found myself in the middle of a meandering village of modern blocks, built over square miles of disused warehouses and other such shipping fraternities. I veered off into a part of the town I'd never been in before, but turned back shortly after for fear of not making it to Marie's designated pick-up point, back on Parnell Street. As it was, I was a good twenty minutes early, so I picked up a copy of a music magazine with Placebo on the cover, figuring that Amy might appreciate

the read once I was done. In thinking of her, I logically moved to thinking of the boy, and marvelled sadly at how things are never so good and so innocent as to allow a smiling childhood reflection last the day.

Marie was on time, a little flustered by something that hadn't righted itself during her morning's work, and completely unwilling or able to go into it. She changed tack completely, and launched into an account of the events surrounding Jane Carroll's husband's stag session, as though she was selecting the mood for lunch. Though outwardly at least I was the perfect audience for the tale of arrests and mistaken identity in remote Connemara, I was referencing my own recent stag experience (or lack of), and wondering how it was that everything reminded me of *everything*.

We parked in the grounds of a newish hotel, the name of which I was too distracted to catch. I was beginning to squirm in worrying how it was that Marie had managed to have me included in her plans. *'By the way, I hope it's OK if an old friend of mine comes along, he's kinda into that skull thing you're working on.'* After all, and for all she still knew, I had some reporting credentials. I could be doing a story on the whole thing. I hadn't the nerve or even the wherewithal to phrase asking if she'd said anything about me. I guess I could sell myself early on in the conversation. I was feeling stupid enough about being there anyway, and could really have done without anyone else thinking so too. Awkwardness was taking over as we pushed through the doors and into the lobby where Marie's old college flatmate waited.

Jane Carroll was small, gentle, and most definitely not one whose appearance betrayed her vocation. She was pleasant, and genuinely warm in her introduction. In staying behind to exchange chit-chat about Waterford while Marie sourced out the reservation, she had me that little bit extra at ease. So much so that when we were ushered into the expensive surroundings of Stefan's Bistro, I actually found myself looking forward to being there.

Given the pretension, the expensive shortcomings of the menu, and an acceptable predilection towards the local seafood, it was salad all around at our table. The two women opted for a tuna feather spread, and I dug hungrily into a sour chicken Caesar. The talk was light to begin with

– Jane was in town to guest at a lecture out in the Institute of Technology. She waxed lyrical about the fantastic facilities in the college, a hugely superior cousin to the franchise branch in Carlow. Marie took over at this point, as she had become something of a substantial thorn in the hides of ITC directors, calling them out on their many mistakes, and doing all she could to shake things up in the old grey buildings.

‘They’ve ploughed hundreds of thousands – if not millions – into that stupid atrium at the front of the college. All the while refusing to address overcrowding, poor equipment, bad staff, course outlines, the list goes on.’

‘Little change to when we were there, eh?’

The current state of the college wasn’t something I knew anything of, but I guess we had accepted faults twenty years ago because it didn’t pretend to be anything it wasn’t. And Marie was on her soapbox, fed by the flood of young outraged academics who saw her as their voice.

‘The support they have for graduating students is ridiculous. Their administration is a shambles. You’re guaranteed at least one march per year.’

‘Protest?’

‘Everything from grants not being passed on quickly enough to rows over temporary buildings.’

‘Is it the same in all of the Institutes?’

‘I doubt it. I can only really speak for a handful. But we are definitely the worst off. And that’s down to the people in charge. The rot goes all the way through.’

‘Is this something that’s close to your heart too, Jane?’

‘Not particularly, no. But I get it second hand from her. The marina story is my favourite.’

My mid-chew pause sufficed as unfamiliarity. Marie snorted.

‘They have intentions to construct a marina on the River Barrow, and link it to the college by running a tunnel under the main Kilkenny road. They can’t even get what they have right, and they want to build a marina?’

‘You’re kidding me!’

‘I am not. If I’m not mistaken, the model of the plans is still on display in the college. *Marina, tunnel, et al.*’

We moved from there back to Jane's lecture, and subsequently her job. I mentioned an article that'd been printed in my paper a few months before my departure – it had been a lazily damning and general sweep of psychology, written by a 'Sex In The City'-styled journalist in her thirties who really should have known better. To stem the tide of angry professionals who responded, we had to print a hugely apologetic follow-up, and Sarah Jessica Parker's knuckles were well and truly rapped. Given that I was happily confined to the sports pages – though not immune to chirpy, fun and colourful inserts itself – it was never really of any huge concern to me, and I found myself contentedly unable to defend the rag whenever its lowering standards arose in conversation.

'So what's your interest in the Milford case, Tom, if you don't mind me asking?'

It was as polite and as gentle a way to breach the true subject of the lunchtime meet as any. I smiled in gratitude.

'Not at all. Milford is actually an area I know really well. I hadn't heard about what happened there until Marie here filled me in. Since then, I've done a little research, and I'm looking into doing a piece for the newspaper on it.'

It wasn't a total lie. I didn't mention any newspapers by name.

'Well, what can I do for you? Bear in mind, now, that there will be some things I cannot go into. Like Marie and her motorway.'

Marie looked up from her bread with a good-natured frown.

'Well, firstly, how exactly are you involved?'

'I'm consulted on anything which involves the occult, rituals, any kind of unusual psychological incidence that fits in this. I've been doing the gig with the Gardaí for about four years now, only a handful of cases, mind you.'

'And they called you in because it looked like some kind of ritual, right?'

'Right. They've taken me in to offer what I can. Which, unfortunately, hasn't been a whole lot so far.'

'Really? What can you tell us?'

She took a deep breath.

'OK, let me see. I'm just trying to compute what can be said and what can't. Just stop me if I lose you.'

Both Marie and I nodded. I was surprised to see her sudden surge in interest.

'You know that the kids found four skulls hanging by rope under the weir. We have forensically tested the skulls, and they're pinpointed round about the turn of the century.'

'When did they get this back?'

'About two weeks ago. Not quite Quantico, but not quite Inspector Clouseau either. Somewhere in between.'

'So if they're old, it's more of a ritual type thing than anything else?'

'Correct.'

'Any idea where the skulls came from? They would have been dug up, I assume?'

'That's the standard assumption. Unless somebody has a stash of 1900 bones somewhere. However, there's no indication as to where they were taken from. Either some well-covered tracks, or they haven't looked in the right place yet. You'll get most of this in the papers, by the way. I'm not offering any major scoops today!'

I grinned. After all, I hadn't seen anything beyond regional reporting on the find, so it was all a kind of scoop as far as I was concerned.

'Was anything else thrown up by the forensics?'

She seemed to approve of the question.

'Traces of hydrogen peroxide.'

'Any significance?'

'Possibly. Traditionally recommended as a modern cleanser for skulls used in witchcraft.'

'Wow. Any suggestion of witchcraft here?'

She feigned hurt of some nature.

'And here's where I come undone – yes and no. The significance lies with the numbers. There were four skulls found. The number five is more synonymous with rituals and witchcraft than four. Considerably so.'

'How so?'

'The number five crops up as a representation of a number of entities in witchcraft and black magic. Not necessarily in the occult, however. There are five wisdoms, five stages, five senses.'

'And nothing with four?'

'Exactly. Or at least not as far as my research can tell me.'

I could easily have been sidetracked into asking where and how she would research something like this, but I didn't.

'Is there any chance that there might have been five?'

'I've considered that. As part of the search that went on after the find, I had the underwater guys comb the river bed under the weir, in case a single skull had fallen. But the layout of the four didn't really leave room for a fifth.'

'Ornamental?'

'Almost. And there wasn't a fifth piece of rope with frayed ends, or anything like that.'

'Tell me more about the five skulls.'

'Sure. There is a popular ritual in witchcraft known as the Five Skull. It's used to create an environment for the casting of spells. Always outdoor, always at night. One skull each at the five points of a pentagram drawn on the ground.'

'Creepy.'

'That would depend on the spell. Now, if they had found five skulls instead of four, I would have suggested that perhaps this was some kind of ornament created at the end of such a ritual. But there were only four, so it's OK to share this with you!'

The ease with which she spoke of a world that I knew nothing of and could only have a fearful respect for disturbed me.

'Any other conclusions you can share with me?'

'Well, I believe that given the absence of anything remotely similar in the annals, this was either a botched and incompetent affair, or else somebody with something new and yet to be recorded.'

The shivering idea of *something new* in these circles masked what was essentially a pretty useless conclusion, as far as I was concerned.

'Does the location of the find hold any significance?'

'None, unless you count the proximity to water, and there's any kind of dowsing involved. But that's too vague to offer any clues.'

'Any chance that whoever put them there was interrupted? That whatever they were doing wasn't finished?'

'It's possible. But I don't know where they could have been going with it.'

'Is there any indication as to how long the skulls could have been there?'

'Not long at all. The weir is visible from the far bank of the river. And people walk and fish out around there all the time. Or at least they used to.'

Towards the end of the meal, to include the bored-looking Marie a little more, Jane took us away from the goings-on in Milford and back to the original reason for her friend to be in the city. Marie took the opportunity to voice her displeasure at the morning's developments, and I felt a little guilty for having taken up so much time with my own interest. I began to drift away under the drone of her voice, and started to wish that I had taken notes. Too many things to remember. Not wanting to be appear ungrateful or uninterested in anything beyond Jane's line of work, I shook my head free and rejoined the conversation just as Marie was giggling 'I could tell you, but then I would have to buy you off like a farmer grown suddenly fond of an old ditch!'

Once plates had been scraped, and the waiter sent furious with a measly three quid tip, I thanked Jane profusely for her fascinating time. I had a wealth of information and tips for my article, as I was still selling it. She scribbled a few quick words down on a notepad, handed me the sheet and told me to look it up whenever I got a chance – it bore slight similarities on Milford: stolen skulls used in sorcerous rituals in Bangalore, albeit on a greater scale. I promised to take a look at it, and add her name to the acknowledgements should my story ever make it to print.

With Marie away for a further three hours in the afternoon, I was offloaded once more, and sent with suggestions of museums, cinemas and cheery pubs in my ears. I settled for buying a notepad and pen, and sitting down with a couple of leisurely Guinness in the first quiet-looking pub I came to. There, I scribbled and doodled as much as I could remember of Jane's teachings. The words looked bizarre on their own, certain parts ringed, and no doubt highly interesting to any one of the old timers who couldn't keep their eyes from mine. I barely stopped short of adding Liam's kid's name to the pages, any time I came across the word 'find'. I justified my being in that place, sweet with stout and unfamiliar surroundings, by vowing to use anything and everything I could to help.

Home

In the end, I was happy to leave, to catch my lift home, to be treated to a long and gluttonous meal in the Lord Bagenal on the way back. With an early start and another long tomorrow serving the public awaiting her, there was no notion of ending the day out in more suggestive surroundings, nearer to home. That was something I was still quietly toying with, wondering if I had anything left in me for the game. For today, dinner was fine by me. Belly-filling, reminiscent, and a glorious hundred-mile-an-hour chattering distraction from pictures of skulls on weirs. Just as the day she had given me was a distraction from everything I had brought over from England with me, and seemingly walked straight into back here. Self-centred, but priceless.

Home.7

It is a clear and cloudless night, illuminated and warmed by the moon as though it were in training to challenge the sun in a battle of the sky gods. Nick Spencer is straining his neck as he gazes skyward, wishing he knew more about the stars, their names and their meanings. It looked and felt like a perfect romantic moment, and he was living in fear of doing or saying something to ruin it. So far, everything had been good. She had jumped at the idea of a madcap midnight spin in the car out to Milford, thankful that her mother had sloped off to bed with a headache, and that her father was working the night shift in the warehouse. He, on the other hand, enjoyed the benefits of parents who cared not where and when he went, or what he did with his holidaying brother's Fiesta. His choice of destination had been inspired: water, moonlight, and not a soul to encounter or interrupt their witterings. Distracted by the company, he'd forgotten all about the skulls down by the river, remembering them only when she mentioned it, in awe. They strolled hand in hand along the narrow road, having parked in the small gravel clearing on the other side of the drawbridge. There were occasional gurgles from the canal to their left, and the steady proximal growl of the more tumultuous Barrow away on their right, its currents crashing down through a series of rapids. Apart from these sounds, the only fractures in the night air come from their lips, the nervous giggles and unassured bravados that sit well with young lovers only beginning to get to know each other.

Sarah Byrne had pulled the green and white Boston Celtics windcheater from the stand in the hall as an afterthought, not sure if her day clothes would keep her warm on whatever wild expedition her boyfriend of three weeks had planned. Nick would not have been surprised had she admitted to spending some time in choosing her outfit for the occasion. The unfastened buttons of her jacket tugged downwards, exposing the light cotton inner lining, its bleached whiteness accenting the colours of her skin. She wore a navy V-neck T-shirt underneath, and the moonlight covered her in an ultraviolet glow, the whites of her eyes and her smile also radiant against her smooth honey face and neck. Nick enjoyed the scrapey roughness of the coat as he laded her waist with his right arm. In turn, she slinked her hand around and over his hip. He felt the muscles of his abdomen working as he walked, and felt damn glad of

the intense program of sit-ups he had subjected himself to over the previous month or so.

The road hauled itself lazily up over a stone humpbacked bridge, and veered away from the calls of the river, bringing the lazy stroller in a wide oval across the canal and around a wide expanse of countryside, incorporating a large private estate, the stables of which were visible from where Nick and Sarah had left the car. It was Nick's plan to stop momentarily at the corner of the bridge, and stand staring out at the wildest part of the water before making his move. In the fledgling stages of whatever it was he had going on with the slightly younger girl, he had never been sure when to dart in for the kiss. On most occasions, there had been a night's worth of Bud and Smirnoff Ice in them both, and inhibition levels that a worm couldn't have limboed under. Once, after 'American Pie' – not a good flick for budding and nervy lovers – they had been completely sober saying their goodbyes, and suffered terribly. She was tense, dry and then catastrophically apologetic. He struggled to shake the memory from his mind as he swung his other arm gently up onto her shoulder, projecting them both across the cold tar into the kerb of the bridge. She didn't object, allowing herself to be guided, her feet almost tangling with his as he moved directly behind her. As she reached the solid granite work of the old bridge, she placed her hands on the mossy ledge, and leant slightly out into open space. He crushed softly into her, feeling the firm bunches of her rear on the sinews of his quads. Again, she raised no objection, even as his arms crossed over and folded themselves across her stomach. They stayed like that for minutes, his chin reaching down onto her collarbone. And then he began nuzzling her neck, kissing it gently, giving her every opportunity to swivel around and properly into his control. She left him playing with the side of her head briefly, stretching back on the opposite side before turning quickly and striking to dissolve any fears he may have had in a storm of coiling snakes and roving tentacles.

Twenty minutes later, in pausing for breath, she whispers something about it being time she started getting home. He is reluctant, agitated, but aware that he has no choice in the matter. Playing the gentlemanly hand may well put some points on the board at a later date. With the clock suddenly ticking, he realises that completing the peaceful

circle around the block – with a number of potential pit-stops carefully earmarked – is for another day. Instead, they tumble back down from the bridge, tight together, and back along the small road, parallel to the sleepy canal. There is a foot-high wall running the length of the lane, a minimalist barrier between the humans and the waterside reeds and wild plants. Nick silently notices that anywhere along the wall would be another good place to stop. He could sit himself down on the cool stone, and coerce her onto his lap. Perfect. But not for now. For the next time he pulled off another of these foolproof midnight soirees.

The shimmering silence of the countryside is broken by a sudden heavy splash in the water a little ahead of them. In his arms, he feels her jump violently. They both stop walking, and peer into the darkness through the thin wall of saplings and river weeds. She asks nervously what he thinks has caused the disturbance, but he cannot offer anything by means of explanation. There is a further distractive sound, now behind them. A hasty ruffling of reeds, and of something weighty on the move. They spin around, and he hears his girlfriend scream his name before seeing what she sees. A black and distorted shape is spilling out over the wall, hopping quickly from the messy bank onto the road. Nick is aware of another scream, and a sudden cold press on his torso where Sarah has detached herself. The shape covers the ground between them in time that seems all the shorter because Nick has frozen. He sees an unusually long and unshapely arm swinging into the night air, and drops instantly into his own darkness as the extension connects cleanly with his skull. He doesn't hear the dry ringing tone as the bat slips to the tarmac, as the shape frees its arms in order to properly address the screaming girl.

* * * * *

On Wednesday, I got up and showered, ignored my still-bagged laptop, and played around with the tangled paperwork I'd brought with me, waiting. The temptation to do a little looking into the Bangalore skull tale was great, but I didn't want to heat my boots in the household by taking over the phone line for my modem. Thankfully, there didn't appear to be any residual disapproving of my day away with the ladies, and Janet had appreciated the call excusing myself from dinner at home. Late the previous night, I had accepted the invitation to join herself and Chloe on

a day trip to Kilkenny, to get the seal broken on the latter's back-to-school shopping list. It sounded like a mindless alternative to sitting around, mulling over the stupidity of getting myself involved in the missing boy's investigation and the muddle of psychology from the two days before, and as such I was already warm to the idea, even before my younger niece *insisted* that I travel with them. In truth, I wasn't all that bothered about my clumsy interference in the gallery from a personal perspective – I was more concerned with how Liam was going to take it. My intentions had been pure, if misguided. I didn't need him to take offence to my efforts. He didn't need it either. And as I helped with the post-breakfast clear-up, gathered whatever I needed from the room, and bundled into the passenger seat of the car, I knew damn well that the day wouldn't suffice in keeping my mind away. And not for the first time since I'd landed home in the fatherland, I found myself placing my own discomfort above the gravity of a missing child, and I reeled once more in disgust at just how selfish I could be.

However, I was proven to be wrong on one count. I enjoyed my day shopping, and only slid back to consider the darker clouds of the moment whenever Chloe did something to win my favour; in appreciating the honest and unforced smiles that only the young can bring to me, I wandered to dread the horror of having such delight taken away from a parent, and shook my head in understanding that I had no idea of what Liam was going through. Gamely, I accepted the eight year old's every effort to drag me back from stern thoughts, and joined in on a spree that saw her father's credit card take an awful hammering. A new school uniform – neck to toe. Sportswear, catering for potentially everything from basketball on the rough school courts in the searing heat of June to hill walking up Killeslin in the wind and rain of March. A new schoolbag, complete with mobile phone pouch. A vast array of stationary supplies to go in the bag, but no mobile phone – Janet snorted at the suggestion when Chloe pined for the naked loneliness of an empty pouch. The visit to the book store for the first batch of that year's curriculum was left until last, until late afternoon, because they would have to go straight into the boot of the car; traipsing around the medieval city with armfuls of heavy books was nobody's idea of fun. We worked up a finer appetite by walking along the walls of the old castle, which sat kissing the banks of the Nore. Just before reaching the tree-covered lough I knew (incorrectly)

as Sapling Lake, we veered into the castle grounds, and made our way up through the lawn-like fields and out through the main entrance. We ate in a small café in an alley just off the junction of The Parade and Main Street, and though the youngest member of our entourage voiced an immediate preference for Supermac's, she was appeased at the sight of ice-cream sundaes on the sweet trolley.

There was a downpour on our thirty minute journey home, and I could see that the teaming rain and the diminished visibility on the road was unnerving Janet. I offered to take over the wheel, sounding as cheerful as possible, not wanting to arouse any worry in the child safely seatbelted in the back. She turned me down, proposing that the worst of the sudden wet outburst would pass in minutes. The rain had a soothing effect on the traffic, with only the odd suited go-getter in an '00 registration willing to bump the speed limits in passing us. Each overtaking brought with it an unsettling drone of twin engines clashing, and the whirling fizz of wheel mists crashing around the car. I could see Janet's knuckles whitening, and I bit my lip and the overwhelming urge to crawl out the side window and onto the bonnet, from where I could spring into the executive's day, and beat him away from whatever haughty importance he was rushing towards. 'Top Executive Clubbed To Death With Own Personal Organiser.' It sounded as good as ever.

The heavens closed their legs just as soon as we had passed the turn-off for Bagnelstown, and the reappearing sun began its work on the steamy puddles atop the blacktop. Janet relaxed, and I stopped to smile at whatever light-hearted comment she'd made, interrupting my brief connections between spiteful fictitious headlines and the real abnormalities I'd read of so recently in the local rag. Chloe was manning the stereo remotely with her own choice of saccharine pop, and I welcomed the distraction of her insisting that I pay particular attention to track twelve on her S Club 7 CD.

Having taken the back road out in the morning, and not the main Kilkenny route on which we were now inbound, we had not gone past Milford junction. I was looking forward to whizzing past the old girl, and whispering invisibly in promise that I would be out there properly at some point in the not-too-distant future. There was very little announcing

the turn – to the left, as we faced Carlow, an overgrown GAA pitch, the rickety goalposts standing as shepherds over a herd of sheep. Away behind that, the looming presence of Killeshin, white houses dotted along the remotest parts of the hill, vast freckles of darkest green representing rough forests on the gentle slopes. Somewhere between here and there – considerably nearer to here – lay the wild waters, canals, locks and stories of Milford, hidden by a kilometre of rich countryside. On the opposite side of the main road, there was a garage on the corner, considerably more modern and prosperous than I last remembered. I recalled a run-down and vacant property, a dusty relic to the kind old sweetshop that had served Mark and I in years gone by. It seemed to have undergone a revival of some kind – a knock-on effect of the growth being experienced by the nearest town, perhaps.

However, it wasn't the familiarities or the resurgent oddities that were holding my eye as the car drove past, slowing dutifully to consider the two squad cars pulled up on the hard shoulder, and the half dozen or so Guards in bright yellow raincoats who were holding court at the lip of the Milford road. I must have amused the two men who were looking directly at me, a dumbstruck idiot with wide eyes fixed on the scene, turning my head to remain in sight as we pulled away. It looked like they were blocking the road. Cutting Milford off. All that I had learned over lunch in Waterford rushed to the front of my brain, as though even it was straining in interest, wondering what was going on *now*.

'God save us, I hope that's not an accident.'

'Where?'

Chloe had been too involved with rearranging her shopping to notice anything.

'Back there. The Guards are out.'

I moved away from the chilly surprise, and spoke thoughtfully.

'No, it didn't look like an accident.'

'You don't think so?'

'No cars, no glass. If it was cleaned up, why are they still out there?'

'God knows.'

I didn't offer anything else. I hadn't honestly looked to see if there was any glass.

'I suppose we'll hear it on the news, if there was anything.'

'Any what?'

'Nothing, Chloe. I'm talking to your uncle.'

It was after six by the time we reached home, and Mark's car was already in the driveway. As we bundled our bag-heavy way through the door, Janet muttered something about the inevitability of having to move her just-parked car in the morning to allow her impatient significant other egress from the homestead. I dropped what was in my hands on the kitchen table, and headed for the sitting room. Mark was in the armchair nearest the television. The idiot box was spitting back images of a fat agitated politician condemning one thing or another. On hearing me enter the room, he reached hurriedly for the remote, and punched the mute button. My immediate reaction was definitely not one of goodness.

'Did you hear the news?'

As daft a question as ever, unless the *news* had been blatantly obvious and widely broadcasted as the only *news* at that time.

'What news?'

He paused briefly to make a whistling shape with his lips, and I felt a kind of immature excitement radiate from his face. It may well have been an injustice. At least he had muted the cholesterol-ridden agenda-laden politician.

'There's another kid missing. He was grabbed from Milford last night. It's all over CKR.'

'Good Jesus.'

I couldn't retrace my day in reflex to see the fluorescent cops at the junction. The instant shock – no doubt surging from the freshest pool of all that had happened lately – took care of all else. Even the notion that the local blue-shirt-crimson-neck radio station had the scoop.

'I know. Apparently he was out with a girl, she copped a hiding, knocked cold out, came to, and found him gone.'

I said no more, because I was slothily computing the flashes before my eyes. Milford *again*. Another missing boy. Not right.

'And get this – someone or *something* came up from the canal to get them.'

'What?'

The ludicrous picture he painted was enough to claw back a little clarity. But he wasn't laughing. He had a ten penny mixture of worry and incredibility in his eyes.

'Yeah. Whoever it was came out from the water, caught them off guard.'

'Holy Christ.'

'Amy knows them both to talk to. She's in bits.'

'Amy?'

'Yeah.'

The familiarity of the words *Amy* and *missing* brought back the most recent worried faces she'd worn in waiting for news – any news – of her AWOL boyfriend. I gazed at him with what must have been a vacant stare.

'What is it with that place these days?'

'Huh?'

Though I had already and automatically winced at the connection, I wasn't moving through speech quickly enough for Mark.

'Milford. First the skull thing. Now this. What's going on out there?'

'I don't know.'

I trailed off as Chloe came crashing into the room, eyes fixed on the TV, ready to disapprove of anything heavier than Australian teatime soap operas.

'Wonder how Liam is taking this, if they're related.'

'Who's related?'

'Nothing, Chloe.'

'Fine. Don't tell me.'

The machine-gun interchange between father and daughter gave me space in which to run my fingers through my hair, and sidle off towards the door with a muttered excuse. I had to rid myself briefly of people needing me to be vocal or attentive. I needed room to allow the passing of the squallish discomfort that had wrapped itself around my chest. I walked almost directly across the hall, into the bathroom, and locked the door behind me.

Perched in the early evening light on the bowl of the toilet, I breathed my way softly through the insane and the real. From actually considering there to be some kind of serial teenage kidnapper running amok in Carlow Town, to blinking crazily at the notion of a canal-dwelling beast roaming the waters of Milford. I thought of Liam, and of there now being a second set of terrorised parents. I thought of the two girls under the same roof as I at that very moment, and watched as they were snatched in my mind from the driveway by faceless black figures. I paused to finger Amy's apparent involvement in both actual abductions, and the image of her being pulled away from me became even stronger. I had not the capability to insist that both missing kids were boys. I was too worried for her safety, and too bamboozled by the linear progression of shocking surprises on my enforced holiday to my home. This was getting worse. Worse than anything I could remember having known in all my time in London, England. A city where you could depend on this sort of thing. But not here.

My self-inspection was shattered by Janet, who had obviously learned the latest in the meantime. She called something atonally through the door about not feeling up to cooking, and that they would be ordering in pizza instead. I hopped up from the bowl, and needlessly flushed, retaining enough composure to want to save face in front of her.

The pizza was good – meaty, though heavy on greenery – but even the circular machete used by the delivery outlet to slice through the thick dough base could not have serrated the silent tension in the kitchen. Amy had not joined us, and her parents battled with their own worry for her whilst trying to convince the near-to-tears Chloe that there was nothing the matter. I tried my best to assure her with a series of smiles, but if they were as dead on the outside as they were to me, I could only

have scared the little mite. Two slices in, I mumbled something about having had enough, and I excused myself slowly. I deliberately staggered my shuffle towards the door, wanting to give Mark and Janet every available opportunity to halt my progress towards Amy's door. For I was sure it was as obvious to them where I was headed as it was necessary to me; very.

I needed to see her, and actually verify that she was still in her room, not grabbed from me and her family like the others so recently. Strange that a mere two disappearances should have yielded such fears in me; I guess it was her supposed attachment to both that fertilised the gnaw. Equally, I wasn't denying that I also had an interest in learning of anything else she might know about the boys, their whereabouts, the rave, her involvement – anything. She could have been hiding something. One missing kid is a shock, but nothing unusual in the long run of this horrible world. Two missing kids – known to each other, and to my niece – is both shocking and too intricate to ignore. I was astounded that her father had not stepped to gently probe her. Maybe he would yet – maybe I was overstepping the Mark. Then again, maybe it was going to be up to me. I wasn't capable of waiting to find out.

I rubbed with my knuckle on her door, rather than knocking. She cleared her throat and asked who it was. I replied with an unassured *Tom*, and asked if I could go in. She seemed a little taken aback by the suggested intrusion, but answered affirmatively. I pushed through into her room, shouldering the door shut as I did so, and found her propped up on her bed, flicking through a magazine as the mournful tones of Coldplay or Travis – I have trouble separating them at times – spilled quietly from the 3 CD changer on her study table. She had rummaged her hair into a messy knot at the back of her head, the now-white shades of her face no longer curtained by warmth. I stopped and stood at the end of the bed – she suddenly looked way too old to have me join her on its giving softness. When she spoke, she did so patiently with a phlegmy rasp. Her eyes seemed dry yet anxious.

'What is it?'

'Your Dad tells me you know the second guy who's gone missing.'

There was no point pretending that there wasn't any connection, that he was the second of two separate disappearances, as opposed to the second of two related. Or however many there might be. She blinked.

'Yeah.'

'He's a mate of Brian's?'

'Yeah.'

With her boyfriend in the equation so early, I had no great problem revisiting her ongoing fret. Yet still I winced.

'Is there any connection?'

'Probably.'

'Probably?'

The immediate and emotionless franking surprised me – no detective work required here. Any faux-polite questions I may have had about the missing kid's girlfriend – also known to Amy – would now not be asked. In truth, my immediate interest was only in the boy.

'Yeah.'

The instant thing to mind: 'Any connection to Brian finding those skulls?'

'Yeah.'

Any other time I would have tired of the 20 questions format.

'How?'

'Nick was with Brian when they found them.'

Bingo. Quite possibly something I could have surmised had I considered the facts with anything approaching clarity. But for now, I needed to be spoon-fed and hand-held until I was ready to pass my own thoughts. I let the sudden rush of *something* raise a shimmer of hairs across my skin before recognising the sincerity in her eyes as she shared.

'Hold on a minute – their names were in the paper around the time, weren't they?'

'Whose names?'

'The guys who made the find.'

'Yeah.'

'Four of them?'

She seemed to pause and count: 'Yeah.'

'So everybody knows about them?'

Or at least everybody reading the regional newspaper.

'I guess so.'

'So everybody would make the same link?'

'What?'

'Everybody would know that the two missing kids were two of the kids who found the skulls.'

'Suppose.'

'Did the news report say anything about Brian?'

'No. Just Nick.'

Jesus – Liam hadn't brought the cops in *yet*?

'Did it say anything about Nick being involved in finding the skulls?'

She frowned as though she were trying to recall.

'Not him. It just mentioned that they were found near the same place a little while ago.'

No mention of Liam's kid. Still. Either he hadn't called the force officially on board and was still depending on Colin, or tight lips were speaking to the media. Damage limitation? Shielding the parents of Carlow from two in place of one? I could only speculate; I had my own line of questioning to follow.

'Do you know anything about them about in Milford?'

'Finding *that*?'

I nodded. And noticed a tear gleaming in one eye.

'No. They were just there by accident.'

'Any reason for anybody to... be after them?'

The single tear rolled from her eye down her cheek, passing a wobbling lower lip along the way. I felt my head cock itself in sheer sympathy.

'No. None.'

'Come here.'

I moved around the side of the bed, arms outstretched. She waited until her face was buried in my chest before opening up and crying deeply. I could feel her eyes working through the thin cotton of my shirt, and a painful pity in my heart. Her sobs were quiet – insufficient to raise any passers-by in the hall – and lasted no more than a minute. I brushed

back loose strands of hair from her brow as she rubbed her eyes fiercely with her fists. A few deep breaths later and she was smiling weakly, without any of the self-anger most humans ten years her elder would feel having broken down in front of *anybody*. Though troubled at having caused the salty stain below my collarbone, I had one final tribulation for her. I had paused to do the caring uncle thing, and tended to her needs. Now I selfishly needed her to tend to mine, and fill in the glowing, gaping blank. Two of four were missing. What of the remaining two boys?

Home.8

On a clammily warm Wednesday evening, a seventeen year old male answering to the name of Barry Johnson stretches his wiry frame contentedly in the tangerine sheets of sunlight. He is lying slouched in a dirty green armchair, as badly treated by Mother Time as it is old. The armchair has been hauled from the chilled depths of a farmhouse porch, and set in a yard facing the deckchair in which Barry's friend Senan is slurping thoughtfully from a can of Bud. In turn, Barry has hauled himself the twenty bus service miles from Carlow Town to the tiny country village where his friend is spending the summer. Unlike his visiting comrade, Senan was lucky enough to secure a job during the holiday months, and earns a modest wage for his yawning mornings spent assisting the greenkeepers at the brand new golf course. Of course, luck had less to do with it than loose nepotism, as Senan's father had gruffly called in the favour owed to him by Seamus Creaney, fellow solicitor and dubhouse regular. And so it was that Begley The Younger found himself at the mercy of the army of red-clad greenkeepers, and living with a happily squabbling farming family of fourteen. The Byrnes charged him a measly £30 for his board, providing a bed in a room next to two snoring twenty-somethings, two daily bouts of over-feeding, and an introduction to the strange sports and procedures they preferred gambling to. It was a far superior option to travelling to and from home daily, although it did mean that he missed out on whatever skulduggery the crew got up to in Carlow from Sunday to Thursday. He hadn't been home at the weekend, forced instead to work overtime, and he hadn't yet bothered returning his mother's missed calls. So having a friendly and familiar face around that evening was quite alright by him. Barry Johnson hasn't spoken or heard from the others since Friday night, hence their light conversation is limited to the usual subjects – girls, and just how loaded they are going to get that night, firstly on cans as dusk begins to drizzle around them, and then on cheap Guinness in the pub about a mile down the road.

Barry Johnson is more than happy to speak of the former, especially with the fresh letter from his good friend Aisling rustling in his jeans pocket. Aisling is one of very few people who knows of Barry's desire to date Jill Woods, and she guards his secret closely, as he has begged of her. She is willingly (but up until recently reasonably

unsuccessfully) acting as a go-between, returning to Barry any titbits of information she can squeeze from her casual school acquaintance, and those around her. She enjoys sending and receiving personal mail too much to abandon the archaic system in favour of text messaging or emails, and Barry complies eagerly. Her latest mauve stationary debriefing is the best yet. Aisling insists that as she bundled her way into The Stables on Friday evening, Jill had been making her way back out onto the street. Walking slowly away from signing off her short conversation with Barry, smiling warmly and happily as she did so. It was the best of signs, his friend heralds, and a reassurance he had not known of. Still wanting to cloak his intentions, he offers no specifics to his evening debate with Senan, but secretly filters each and every generic comment he makes, assuring himself that it is of a certain happy smiling girl he is speaking.

There is no mention of that weird night in Milford, because to two minds capable of thinking along similar lines, it was no more than some kind of ghoulish prank, and not important enough to recall. No mystery. There is no mention of unreachable friends or possible abductions, because Senan has not returned either of his mother's calls. Because neither of the senior Byrnes were around to make conversation about news from down the road. Because Barry has been in Dublin since Sunday, taking in an amazing Gomez gig at the Castle and two nights with his holidaying family in Malahide. Because Barry had travelled down from the capital that afternoon, paused only for a shower and to pick up his new letter, bundling back down to the bus stop without speaking to a soul. Because the rumours and whispers had not yet found their way over the county border, to where two risingly merry teenagers might have seen paleness snaking across each other's cheeks.

The two boys sit drinking for two balmy hours, disturbed only by a loud and staged altercation between the curious youngest Byrne and the farm's scruffy sheepdog. By the time the nip of darkness is beginning to suggest that they need a little more than a light T-shirt each, it is time to move their session to The Black Cross. More interested in moaning at the impending trek, neither cheerful reveller is capable of noticing the van that has partly secluded itself a stone's throw away from the courtyard in which they have been sitting. They know not when it had arrived, or that it sat patiently, taking a risk in assuming it knew to where the two boys

were headed. They would be taking control of a small table in The Black Cross when the van next cleared its throat, and followed their trail, coming to a rest in the grainy car park of the pub they were now declaring to be the finest in the land.

The Black Cross is a country pub for country folk, and pretty damn unwilling to bow to the demands, wishes or comforts of anybody outside that bracket. It is small, decorated by ploughing and farming paraphernalia, old metal advertising boards and an occasional air of unfriendliness. Despite being used to a little more variety behind the bar and a few less querying glares from their fellow drinkers, Barry and Senan find themselves relaxing to a point where they feel as comfortable in their newest watering hole as they have ever been in any. The old wooden CD jukebox amuses itself idly, picking random tracks and playing them generously for free, filling out the silence left as the regulars prefer their own company to that of Tom Petty. Eventually, Senan rises to investigate, and empties a handful of change into the machine, queuing up a selection of hard rock numbers from a 1980's compilation. After breaking themselves in gently by mouthing along to 'A Kind Of Magic' by Queen, they earn the total disgust of their Guinness peers by wailing air guitar along to Bon Jovi's 'Wanted Dead Or Alive.' They are too involved in the solo to notice the smartly-dressed woman slipping through the door, making her way to the bar, and sitting at an angle to them, sipping with a frown from a rum and Coke.

When the two boys clock the red-haired woman in black, they descend into a huddle of boyish whispers and bullish bravado. Small bets and wagers are floating in their badly-stained breaths, yet neither teenager has the considerably-aided nerve to approach her. She is tall, pale-skinned, and mature. Senan and Barry are working on a side elevation, and what little reflection they can cop stealthily in the barside mirror. Her eyes are mostly hidden by the thick-rimmed glasses she wears, but her lips make up for the nuisance, ruby-suggestion in colour, and seemingly jellyish in texture and sheen. Her hair is deep and dyed red, bordering nearer to the shade of the shoulders of Carlow's county jersey in rain than to that of the usual tint of redheads. In truth, her smuggled appearance is irrelevant; she is the youngest woman of three in the bar – though she could possibly see

the combined age of her freshest admirers, with change to spare – and therefore open to securing their complete attention.

It takes a supreme effort on the part of Senan Begley and Barry Johnson to remain rooted to their church-reject bench when the woman gathers her light belongings and strides towards them. Their immediate instinct is to give in to the panic that is gleefully insisting that she has only retribution on her agenda, an ear-warming for the two slurred idiots making prolonged eyes at her. However, they are unable to run, and in time will grow to feel relieved that they didn't, and later still, regret the same. She introduces herself as Jean Topspeake, a Briton on retreat, travelling the back roads of Ireland during her summer break from teaching. She speaks with an enchanting accent, and touches each boy on the hand from time to time as she reaches peaks of importance. Senan and Barry are too entranced by the sudden discussion on schools and the tiny electric shocks in their hands to notice that not once does she look either of them in the eye. They do not stop to wonder why this furrow-browed woman has chosen to speak to them in that sulky country pub, and them alone. They are too bitten and too clouded by the opportunity to care. Within minutes, they are struggling with their own dilemmas as they nod and grin eagerly at the appropriate moments, answering her questions bashfully, solemnly, but with an overall coating of humour. Secretly, Senan is wondering if ditching Barry is a possibility, if he can hand off his housekey to his visiting friend, leaving him free to engage with Jean Topspeake in whatever sexual deviances she may have had planned. Equally, Barry is mulling over whether or not it is possible to cheat on a girl he is planning to ask out, if it is essentially OK for him to give in to this one all-encompassing urge, and then return in the morning to his infatuation with Jill Woods. He too is concerned by the presence of his friend, and quickly determines from his posture that he has no intention of doing the honourable thing and leaving Barry and Jean Topspeake alone.

When she suggests that they get some takeout, and go for a drive with her, clamours of disbelieved excitement begin crashing against the first true registrations of worry. They had shared enough porno to know exactly what was involved in one-woman-two-man situations, and that it was going to involve witnessing each other in the throes of that which

unbelievably looked like following. Understandably, the two boys exchange worried glances as they finish off their drinks and club together to get a half-bottle of Powers from the bar. There is nothing being said, but they are saying enough with their faces. She follows them out into the car park, leaving some mightily interested locals, not one of them approving. She links arms with both staggerers as they crunch across the gravel, slicing through the uncomfortable silence that had walled up between them.

'You're not afraid of me, are you?', she laughs, squeezing their waists simultaneously.

Senan and Barry trip over their words in haste, wanting to assure her that they are not, fearing that any apprehension on their part may lead to a rethink on hers. Weighing the discomfort of their mini-orgy against the ultimate and immediate achievement brings them slowly back around to where they were. This was too huge and too big an event to knock. They had seen each other in school gym showers; it was nothing. Nothing compared to the glowing and waiting alternative.

Jean Topspeake says something about her bags taking up the passenger seat of her Chimera van, and that her new friends will have to clamber into the back. She swings open the door, and the dim light skins a faded navy carpet on the floor. There is a plywood partition sealing off the driver's cockpit, the large green timber manufacturer's logo flickering faintly on its face. Senan and Barry clamber into the cramped confines and sit facing each other, their backs to the cold metal walls. She tells them that she has something for them both, and asks that they close their eyes and hold out their hands, just like her obedient schoolchildren back in Eastbourne. She withdraws her head from the van and walks around to the front, opens the door and rummages briefly. Behind willingly closed eyes, in their slightly-sickening dizzy darkneses Senan and Barry are seeing a combination of possibilities; dance pills, condoms for the job ahead, bondage instruments – it could be anything. They hear her shutting the passenger side door once more, and coming back around to the open mouth of the van. They can feel her reaching across the space between them, urging *keep them closed* in a sing-song tone, and then pinching them viciously on the underside of their wrists. They blink their eyes open in

pain, and in time to see Jean Topspeake pulling back out into the night air, two finger-length hypodermic syringes in her hands, and a complete absence of expression of her face. She catches the open door with her knee, and slams it shut before either boy can raise a complaint. There are shouts of surprise forming in their throats, but weakness is falling as a weight on their beer-addled minds, and their heads slowly slump to their shoulders. In semi-paralysis, they hear her outside again, this time fumbling at the driver's side. The door might have opened, the engine might have started, and they might have driven off. Senan and Barry could not be sure, feeling only sleep, numbness, and absolutely no clarity whatsoever in distinguishing what belonged to their real world, and this sudden new woollen place in which giants hovered over them, daring them to move and then laughing heartily when they discovered that they couldn't.

The woman is ebullient, allowing her racing breath time to catch up with her heart. She has spent some days away from the fear and the moral apprehension towards the task set for her. That she has played the hardest hand yet in answering intruders' questions is not forgotten, but rather sourced as another reason to believe in her abilities. She is now moving through her chores on autopilot, knowing only that she cannot rest or reduce her efforts until it is finished. Somewhere inside, she is hoping that the shattering relief that will drop itself upon her once the curtain comes down is sufficient to guide her past the memories of what she is presently living through. The pain she has brought, and the pain she will bring. The darkest days are ahead of her, and she faces them with a candle held in yearning, using the distant nirvana as a means to justify the atrocities.

She touches her hand to the remarkably authentic strands of red hair resting on her breast. Jean Topspeake was a stroke of genius made all the more necessary by the events that followed Saturday's operation. She had been equally clever in providing herself with a reasonable explanation for her attendance at the woods – just in case – and had accepted that its telling had been enough to deflect the Guard and the journalist who came sniffing around her studio. She wondered again who it was that had recognised her that night. And smiled while congratulating herself, sure

that the nameless snitch – and more importantly, anybody in the Black Cross pub – would have struggled to identify her now.

* * * * *

I flicked on the car stereo and tuned to one of the local stations, an overwhelming part of me hoping to hear that the boys had suddenly turned up, safe and sound. That the nervous drama of the past few days was over, that answers were available and would be gotten around to once the relieved parents had had enough of holding their offspring tight to their chests. More than anything else, I wanted to hear something that would force me turn the damn car right around, to head back to Mark's knowing that my latest crazed crusade would *categorically* be unnecessary. Instead, switching off after two minutes of inane happy banter and the ash end of a soulfully horrible dance number, I continued grimly along the Wexford road, accepting that what I was doing was useful only in addressing once more my helpless need to do *something*, and quite probably pointless in the eyes of anybody else. Quite possibly even in the eyes of two missing boys. It was enough to keep me going. Or rather not enough to stop me.

Though it drilled deeper and deeper into her teary reserves, I had pressed Amy for everything she could give me on the two remaining *untouched* members of the skull-find team. It was the simplest of progressions: if the brightest and most obvious link between the two missing kids was so, there were another two names, and another two boys satisfying this ugly criterion – if coincidence was not a player. I learned that one boy – Senan Begley – was working weeks in the new country club out near the foothills of Mount Leinster. The other – Barry Johnson – was still around town, making occasional summer money delivering spam freesheets for a company owned by his uncle. Amy hadn't seen either for over a week, but could report that her friend Sharon had spoken with somebody who had shared a sneaky nagon of outdoor vodka with Brian on Friday night. She was able to furnish me with mobile phone numbers for both; I'm not sure why I asked, because I certainly had no intention of calling. Verifying that both were OK and accountable became an immediate itch, but I retained sufficient composure to know that unless these boys were the dumbest of a very dumb batch of youths, they

would have made similar assumptions themselves, and were most likely a handful of steps ahead of me. If half of the guys in a town with a particular and unique birthmark are knocked off, and this shared characteristic is made known as the only possible connection, I would assume that the remaining men in town with the same branding will start barricading their doors and investing in some protection. However foolish I had felt after donning the detective's hat in an art gallery in Pembroke, I had no desire to make an idiot of myself by becoming the strange guy who calls teenagers he's never met to remind them of something as obvious as the noses on their cynical faces.

Needless to say, with the unscratched gnaw spreading by the minute, the desire to be able to do *anything* more than just lounge around that evening took me to a place where petrol could not be wasted, and wild geese were plentiful. I would drive out as far as the country club, do whatever snooping or digging I could. Maybe find out where the kid was staying. Maybe ring his mobile, make up something about doing an interview. Maybe make noises about writing a new piece on the skulls he and his friends had found. Maybe there was something bypassing everybody else he had spoken to. Even just establishing some kind of contact, and acknowledging that he was aware of the situation, and taking every precaution possible; this much was infinitely more comforting than allowing my mind take advantage of an inactive body to twist and spiral my thoughts into anything messier. And so it was that I found myself passing the dark clubhouse of Tinryland GFC to the babble of an alien disc jockey, searching for some means to justify turning back and putting an end to what worryingly suggested itself to be another stupid activity.

Neither Mark nor Janet had questioned me announcing that I was going out for a drive; they also steered clear of asking why I had spent so long in their disturbed daughter's room. The air in the house was uneasily subdued, and running away from it became a further consequential advantage to my rambling.

Heeding the first signpost for the club that I came to, I took a right turn off the main road down a tight country lane, passing a darkening farmhouse, outside which a young boy had a dog jumping over deck chairs in some kind of primitive Crufts time trial. I drove for a

couple of minutes, passing a stern-looking pub with petrol pumps out front and a clutch of houses settling down for the night, eventually pulling up outside the gates of Gleann Coillte. I knew nothing of the new and expensive development, though from the lie of the old walls and the gatehouse – not to mention the lights of the main building twinkling away on the dusken hill – my suspicion was that the club had been built in and around a long-established estate. That the outer perimeter of the exclusive property was being watched shyly by the cosy scattering of Glencole village itself also suggested the same; such tiny townlands are known to have popped up around wealthy landowners in times gone by, particularly in rural areas. There was very little to the village – homes, a singular shop, a further pub and a church away on the edge.

Through the broad arch of the imposing entrance – pulled in off the road in a display of cold tarmacadam, well-kept grass and cheery flowerbeds – I could see people walking and idling along the private road that wound itself away from the gateway and in amongst the trees. With no checkpoint or clipboard-toting busybody arresting my movements, I eased the car through the walls, and started the countdown to being asked to leave. As I passed the first of the local couples – at least I *assumed* they were local couples; they seemed a little too casually tracksuited to be patrons – I vindicated my worthless presence in that silent place by proposing that it sure wouldn't be a burden being able to offer some small talk about the gardener's workplace – if I did actually get around to speaking with him. Maybe I could work the angle of being a holidaying guest at the club's small hotel, hearing the skull-tale from my niece, working her in as a connection to lead me to the coincidence of Senan Begley employed in my very accommodation; none if it was clear to me at that moment, but even as a temporary distraction, taking a look around wouldn't hurt anybody. Gave me some time to get my thoughts together.

I drove slowly, slipping in under the cover of tall darkness before coming out again a minute later into an open green area. It stretched upwards to the belly of the hotel, and downwards through hedged gardens to the inky sulk of a small river. Away in the distance ahead of me, the land seemed to continue without a hint of giving way to wild countryside: the course, I figured. I had little time to squint at it, as the road curved back up towards the wide white house, the yellow-orange

lights of the car park warm and friendly in the cooling night air. I moved past the lazy bustle of activity as another guest arranged to have his bags taken from his car and carried the short distance to his room by an unwearily polite doorman. I watched as the bagless round man rummaged irritably in his pant pockets for a tip. I could see the mouth of a second set of gates peeking out from behind woods at the far end of my road; I would have no need to turn back around the way I had come. And I was ready to leave. I had seen no sign of workmen or gardeners (aside from the bag carrier), and no means by which to explore the golf course itself. I was sure that one of the small offroads or signposts could have directed me were I so inclined, but I wasn't really all that bothered. The curiosity had subsided. I had an *action item*. I was going to call Senan Begley. I would lie about the story I was writing for an English broadsheet, and neglect to mention any of my Carlovian family ties. I would press for his feelings on the disappearance of his comrades. I would probe him for anything else he would let slip – intentionally or otherwise – about his and their involvement. I had finally fallen upon something useful and worthwhile that satisfied my need to procrastinate.

I turned left and drove alongside the outermost wall of the club, correctly assuming that it would lead me back to the familiarity of the village. Seconds later, past the town limits, I pulled into the side of the road, and killed the engine when happy that I wasn't an obstruction. I took from my pocket the slip of paper upon which I'd scribbled the numbers Amy had dictated as she browsed through her mobile's phone book. I took my own handset from its passenger seat nest and tapped in Senan's ten digits. And then listened to myself breathe as the call rang itself off, eventually presenting me with the option to leave a message with his voicemail service, if I so desired. I did not. Though my pulse was racing with the hasty rehearsal of the script I had prepared for my side of our conversation, I was not willing to waste any of it on a machine.

A little disappointed by the wasted effort, I started heading back towards where I had first turned off. I had to fight to suppress the insistence that I had achieved nothing, trying to believe instead that I had at least taken myself from an uneasy armchair in Mark's to just about as near as I could get to the boy on my own. The detraction continued nonetheless, enough to force me into easing the brakes on as the giant

wooden sign beckoned me into the grey car park of The Black Cross pub. In between the derision and the fault-finding, I had quickly taken stock of the remaining immediate options – harassing the staff at the club, or putting my head into the lounge on my way home – and decided that disturbing the boy at work – if gardeners did work that late – was a bad idea. Making a few basic enquiries at the bar wasn't going to wound anyone – if anything, it might go some way towards addressing the squirms of unfulfillment. I was not going to drive all the way home feeling as downtrodden as I did. Once again, the worst in me had taken over.

I made straight for the bar, and beckoned the twenty-something barman with a nod of my head. The drop in the conversation level as I crossed the floor was as subtle as it was comfortable. As I ordered a Lucozade – I figured that a paying customer might make more headway than a freeloader – I heard a short faint murmur from a table in the corner, and a responsive explosion of manly laughter. My blood began to simmer. I didn't need to look to affirm that I was instantly a source of amusement for a redneck comedian and his slack-jawed audience. It was the clichéd stuff of movies made at the expense of such country bumpkins. The *we don't like your kind of stranger 'round these here parts* mentality. The barman returned with my drink, and I shifted my attention away from wanting to turn and glower at the homeroost homeboys. I tried on my *helpless good guy* face, wary of how creepy my questions might be to a stranger.

'I'm wondering if you can help me, I'm trying to reach a nephew of mine, he's staying around here. His name is Senan Begley.'

He looked up from his attentive pour, and looked briefly puzzled before offering a smile. A genuine smile.

'I haven't heard of anyone by that name, sorry.'

If he was from the area, he obviously hadn't been schooled there. The fact that all five digits were in place on both hands should have been a guide. I sucked air in through my front teeth. Another laugh from the corner.

'He's working out at the club as a gardener. Does that help?'

He pushed the fizzing copper glass towards me, and something along the lines of recognition awoke in his eyes.

'Is he from out of town, yeah?'

I nodded by way of answering.

'There's a couple of gardeners in for the summer. One of them local, so I guess he's the other?'

'Must be. Do you know him?'

'Yeah. He's in here every now and then.'

'Really?'

'Sure. He was in here earlier on.'

I dropped a fiver note onto the counter, realising that I hadn't yet paid.

'How long ago?'

'Em, he left about half an hour ago, I'd say.'

I stifled a curse somewhere in the chamber of my mouth.

'Was he on his own?'

'No. There was another guy with him. I haven't seen him before. And they left with a woman.'

'A woman?'

There was every chance that it was not even Senan Begley we were speaking of, but it was more than I'd had to go on before I'd walked into the bar.

'Yeah. She was English. Long red hair.'

'I see.'

He turned quickly away to run the drink up on the till. I took a long draw from the glass, and paused to wonder at the convenience of the information he'd had to hand. He came back with my pennies' worth of change.

'A red-haired English woman, you say.'

'That's it. Do you know her?'

'No, I'm just impressed by your memory.'

I smirked as I said it, not meaning to appear bad in any way. He grinned back.

'She was pretty striking. There's not a lot of people in tonight, as you can see. Her accent was very strong. And you couldn't help but notice her leaving with the two of them. She was a lot older.'

I conceded with another gulp of Lucozade.

'Were the two guys oiled?'

'They were well on their way by the time they got here.'

I lowered the quarter-full glass to the counter, and pushed myself away from the railing. The suggestion was obvious.

‘You’ve been a help. Thanks for that.’

I glanced towards the coins on the counter, and he thanked me as I turned. What little I’d left wouldn’t get him a taxi to the edge of the village at the night’s end, but it was probably still more than the hyenas had ever given. I chose to shut out the last burst of hearty cawing as I shoved my way through the inner doors, and back out into the deadly silent car park. I had more interest in loosening the mental caricature grip of a red-haired Englishwoman, whether or not it had been Senan at all, and if so, what the hell he and some other drunken tomfool were up to. Or on.

I was only barely back on the Wexford road when the orbs in my mind overlapped, and I felt a knot of uneasy tension shudder in my stomach. Two boys remained. Senan and some other kid whose name I couldn’t remember. There had been a woman and a man fighting at the rave when Brian had gone missing. No mention of red hair, granted, but no mention either of anything other. It was the most tentative of connections to two drunk kids leaving *voluntarily* with an English woman, but it took minutes before my pulse had slowed. I realised that I knew so very little of that which I was involving myself in, that I was being an idiot in allowing any kind of conclusion to wash over me.

That didn’t stop me from filing the specific details away, able and willing to pass on the fruits of my clumsy sleuth work should they be needed by Liam, Colin, or anybody else.

* * * * *

She knew that her redrawn schematic was badly unfaithful to the original and all that had gone on since, but it was going to have to do. Regretfully and apprehensively so. The vision from her brief childhood, the nightmare setting promised to them all by the beast at the top of the classroom – it specifically mentioned the heads. Four of them, swinging, bodyless. There was no negotiation. He didn’t mean for her to paint the nightmare. That was too easy. No, he wanted the physical work of art. When first called upon to recreate the scene, she had fiended and fretted

until falling upon a logical and victimless step; she took the ancient and pungent skulls from plots in an old overgrown graveyard down by the river. The poor souls were long dead, with no further use or need for what she would be taking. And they obviously had no families or descendants who cared enough about them to keep their gravesides respectfully tidy. No, by working cleverly and quickly, she had been able to remove the materials, and cover the tracks behind her. It was a perfect and virtually risk-free way in which to work, and it was a relieved alternative to being forced to harm anybody but herself.

Now, a huge chunk of choice had been removed from proceedings. She knew nothing of the names or history of the four people she had crudely exhumed; if pushed, perhaps she would have been able to retrace her steps and learn a little something, but that was it. The preparation was anonymous, and therefore impossible to feel guilty over. But once her first attempt had been found and destroyed, once the words came again and demanded her correction of the situation, they came with renewed vigour, and a fresh batch of covert evil to punish her. Behind her eyes, she was being lashed against a once-friendly tree, the garments ripped roughly from her back, and her skin peeling in crimson tears with each flash of his whip. Now, there would be no anonymity. Now there would be no guilt-free ease. Now she knew the identity of all four unfortunates, whose heads would be used to replace those of the discovered. She knew that they lived, breathed and existed. She knew that she faced being involved in the preparation of these four people for their final showpiece. She knew that the step taken from secretive grave-robbing shadow to full blown murderer was a great one, but one she quite simply was going to have to take. Four boys, four lives. She had lived at least ten lifetimes of torment, and it could go on no longer. She trembled every hour of the days she spent after making her decision, daunted by the scale of what she was planning to undertake. But never once did it falter, and become this horrible thing she might have to do. Because of his involvement, his promises – the peace she craved, perhaps even word of the Master's end – and his sincerity, it always remained something she was *going* to do. If not, she faced punishment, and the horror of him taking her obituary – from beaten child to criminal – to the papers. She needed her peace. She needed her secrets kept.

There was their names. There was the planning, the ham-fisted investigations, and the acquirement of tools. She had venues in mind, plans and a timeline. And despite the vomiting, the tears and the weaknesses that followed, she did consider attempting to replicate everything to the letter. She picked up a child's book on anatomy from the bookstore, and moved through the terrible possibilities. It would involve killing them beforehand, or at least sedating them sufficiently until she had sawed or cleaved the heads from their bodies. It was this part that seemed the most impossible. She would then have to force one of the stainless steel meathooks – identical to the four she'd decided against using with the old skulls – up through the softest part at the nape of their necks; something to tie a rope onto. It would be the second of two gruesome tasks she would have to carry out on each of four young men whose crime was no greater than being in her wrong place at their wrong time.

Even with the threat of incomplete satisfaction from he who would be watching, she accepted that she could not bring herself to do these unspeakable things. Taking the boys and leaving them to hang by their necks from the old sluice gate was going to be enough. They would die, and surely this was enough for him. He obviously wanted them dead for their treacherous partaking in ruining her original work. That she would have to take the most awful of leaps in accomplishing his wishes was quite possibly only a by-product. He could not expect her to go from where she had been to cutting off the heads of four young men and displaying them as trophies. What she would do instead would suffice, she was sure of it. If not, there would be a new bridge in place. A bridge her newfound criminal defiance was a little less scared of than ever before. He was pushing her towards the darkness, and the changes in her were evident. She would cross whatever needed crossing in turn, though her abiding hope was that both he and she would be pleased by her final draft, and that their lives would then progress separately and without complication. His lips would seal forever, and never speak to strangers of her beatings in the home, or of her awful chores thirty-eight years later.

Home.9

Thursday brought with it an overwhelming sense of secrecy, of owning all that I had learned from my self-important jaunts to the artist's studio, the occult specialist and the previous night's wild goose chase. The fact that I hadn't parted with or shared any of my findings burned away like a dying star behind my eyes. I knew that Mark and Janet had their suspicions: the excuse I'd used about appreciating the day away ambling around Waterford on my own had to have been wearing thin, along with my sudden disappearance in the car, shortly after spending so long with Amy. It may well have been the case that they were too concerned with their own daughter to worry yet about what I may have been up to. Either way, I was feeling trusted, feeling that even if they believed I knew more about that which had their teenager walking the walls at night, they were happy to let me come to them when I thought was right. It'd been a while since I'd last felt any kind of adult responsibility, and it curled around me like a friend's arm.

I had plans for the morning, but that didn't stop me from doing the useful thing and asking if there was anything I could do to help out around the house. There wasn't, replied Janet gratefully, short of lighting a few candles in the church for the safe delivery of the missing two boys; there had been no mention on the local news of any further abductions during the night, so I bit my lip and wondered if there had been nothing more than a deviant sexual appetite behind the party of three that'd left the Black Cross pub shortly before my arrival.

It surprised me that Milford had not been an early port of call just as soon as I'd been introduced to the dark games she'd played recently. Since Saturday's briefing in the Nationalist offices, I'd been to speak with a number of people who may or may not have been involved in some way, and I'd covered the distance from Carlow a hundred times over in terms of car miles. It should have been the first place I'd gone to. Instead, with the car radio instinctively tuned to CKR, waiting to hear of any breaking news, Milford was one of the very last of the places I would visit on my bungling odyssey of investigation.

Approaching the junction, I was insisting to myself that I was there for old times sake, and nothing else. I wanted to see the old girl, to try and place the recent happenings. If I had any expectations for my prying, they were buried under a sudden concern that I wouldn't be allowed anywhere near the scenes of the crimes. As it happens, that fear was entirely unfounded: there was but one unoccupied squad car parked in the vicinity, and no Guards to be seen. I guess they were either watching elsewhere for the return of the perpetrators, or on a break.

Though the white marked Mondeo was unoccupied, it was enough to deter me – as much as I wanted to – from swinging a right once I'd come over the bridge, past the old Strong Stream Mill. Built for the purpose of grinding wheat in the late 1700's, it began generating electricity a century later, and played a proud part in bringing Ireland's first electric street lighting to Carlow Town. Away to my immediate east, behind a row of tall and straight trees, the old sluice gate would have skulked, rusted and stubbornly there. It was she who held the secrets of that night some months ago, and she who quite possibly still held fragments of the rope used to suspend skulls over the rushing waters. Instead, fearing that I might arouse interest or suspicion were I to snoop, I chose to turn to the left, and continued down the narrow canalside road towards the drawbridge. The surprises came thick and fast. Where there should have been crumbling orange walls hiding the thrills of Milford, there was nothing, and I could see it all as I approached: an updated bridge, the first lock on the canal, the land's end where the waterway rejoined the torrents of the Barrow. None of it was as I remembered, and certainly none of it was the friend I knew.

The marshland between the road and the river had also changed, now thickly populated by hardy firs. Another new development, and as I recalled how open the house at the end had been, I couldn't help wondering if the owners had been involved in the plantation. At face value, giving something back to nature and the postcard they called home; a little further under the skin, a project to grant unlimited privacy, with perfectly recountable fringe benefits. I paused, and accepted that the week's overflow of unfamiliarities had turned me sour, to a cynical fool as angry with himself for not being around to know them as with the changers themselves.

I pulled up in front of what I last knew as being a large bed and breakfast, and found it now to be a high-walled modern bastion of secure wealth. With not a notion of Bórd Fáilte in sight. Worse still: most of the older walls had been knocked, and the wild terrain of the island Mark and I had ruled for summers had been levelled to a bowling green. I parked the car and stared aghast through the bars of a corrugated metal gate as the bright open spaces cheered at me. This was wrong. This was a safe, day-glo and welcoming version of Milford. As I stepped out onto the road and slammed the door petulantly, I muttered something bitter under my breath, bearing no longer any surprise that that this place had harboured so much wrong lately; she'd been done a great wrong herself.

I walked slowly across the gleaming new drawbridge, its black girders and fittings stark against the fresh surroundings. There was a plaque of some kind, no doubt mentioning the fixture it had replaced, but I was too taken with the naked shiver of my butchered island. A door opened out onto the green plain from a wall of the house compound, as though it were now some kind of genteel outer garden for the locals. I came to the first lock gate on the canal, its wooden walkway the means by which we used to get across to our kingdom. Now, it seemed so much smaller, so much safer, and so much more pointless. With no trees to climb, no reeds to build forts amongst, no hiding holes to remember – what was the point?

The day was heavy with heat, and not even the sulk could arrest my pull towards the baby sounds of the river beyond the lock. It gurgled and bubbled over rapids as the fluid of the canal poured back into her side. I moved slowly down the bank, fearful of slipping, watching my step carefully on the treacherous pebbles of the towpath. It had never been more than a foot track, kicked up by horses as they plodded alongside their masters' barges. The canal itself had been carved into the Carlow countryside to offer safer passage for fuel shipments and the like, as opposed to the waiting cackling weirs and rocks of the Barrow at Milford. My respect for the black-green depths of the still water remained, as it stank sweetly in its new surroundings – proud to be different, the nail-varnished teenager at his socialite parents' important dinner party. The darkness looked like it could be smothering a thousand secrets, still with room for bones on a weir, and a boy kidnapped at midnight.

I came to where the land veered back to the right, following the river as it turned a corner, as though the extra juice of the canal had spurred it on to a new direction. Of course, this had never happened: in fact, the natural bend lent itself perfectly to the addition of the cautious waterway. But these were the notions proposed by the joint rulers of Lichen Island, and they made for far more interesting hours than any local history book.

Suddenly, taken away at an angle from the ruining lock cottage and the changes behind her, I was back with my Milford, the place I had expected to see. Vicious warmth on my face, the sounds of peaceful monotony in my ears, and an unerring calm upon my mind. I dragged my feet on the dusty grey path, as if I believed that the slower I moved, the more slowly time would too. I began closing my eyes for seconds on end, feeling the wash of Mother Nature as she sponged the week from my hide. Mere miles from the worried parents and the boils of my own family life, but right there, right then, I was fixing me.

I walked for the makings of half an hour, feeling my arms and neck beginning to turn with the sun. There were no signs of life, save for one industrious farming soul, shirtless in the burrows of his field. Occasionally, perch or terrapin would bounce up from the river, gentle splashes invading both silence and the tinfoil surface. They were either feeding on the low-flying insects, or investigating their giant companion on the downstream journey.

As glorious as the day was being, I didn't want to walk all the way to Leighlinbridge, what with my burning skin (foolishly unlotioned) and the rental car abandoned back frowning outside Maison Milford. Another day, perhaps; I could catch a bus out to the county village, walk back in, and have somebody from home pick me up. God knows how long it would take me at my new adopted pace – six, seven miles to cover? It was a beautiful prospect, but firmly one for tomorrow.

Through the pollen summer haze, I made out another decaying little building, about two hundred metres ahead. With heavy heart, I decided that she should be the point at which I spin on my heels and head back to civilisation. As I neared, the urge was there to instead settle on the

crooked tree two hundred metres *beyond* the cottage, but some kind of sense prevailed. Time for home.

I procrastinated as much as I could have within reason by agreeing to walk just slightly past the dying ruin before turning. As I neared, I was still unable to identify its purpose. There wasn't anything on the river to suggest a need, and it was far too small to be a farmhouse to the tilling lands behind her. It could have been a sort of shelter for bargemen. If there was any kind of railing out back for horses, that had to have been it.

From the streak of ragged hedge snaking up through the fields, I could tell that there was a laneway leading down to the rear of the building. I was on my way to investigate – to wonder where on Earth it could lead to – and I had barely caught the flash of parked green when a noise from inside pulled me back to the door of the outhouse.

It rang through the silence, a movement too loud and heavy to be any of the usual small offenders at play. It wasn't until I had pushed back the rotting wood of the door and peered into blackness that I felt the nerves. And the stupidity. Torn away from the peace and quiet of my riverside jaunt, back into uncertainty. Somehow, nosing made sense. It could have been a wild dog. A stray farm animal. A worker – maybe it was used as some kind of store? After all, there had been a car or small van or something at the back. But I just couldn't keep to the plan and walk away. No, that would be the *sensible* thing to do.

'Hello?', I called. No answer. So it was hardly anyone or anything happy to be found there.

I moved slowly into the cool stone surround, with the burning light of the day behind me. Both river-facing windows were boarded heavily across. My feet crunched on a floor of uneven debris, and I could taste the dirty limestone dust being thrown up. I called out again, almost pleading for a cheerful man in overalls to bound out with armfuls of whatever it was he stored here, bringing relief and an end to my latest daft odyssey. There was no cheery man. Instead, seconds of watery quiet, followed by a sharp metal clang in a room to my north-west, and then for

all the world what sounded like a foot being dragged across the pebbles of the floor.

I paused. In the dark, panic was beginning to finger my throat, fighting for space with the grime. The week and its misadventures were taking a turn. A bumbling clot capable of interviewing middle-aged women I was, an all-action hero comfortable in the unfamiliar I was not. I took the mobile phone from my jeans pocket, intending to use its dim illumination once the sunlight had given up the ghost at the far side of the room. I could make out a kind of hallway beyond the doorframe, disappearing into two inky black spaces. I called out again, more in desperation than anything else. I couldn't go back. Not until I had fed my shaking curiosity, and killed the chill in my chest. I needed to be sent back, satiated.

I shuffled towards the gaping doorway, knowing that I needed to go left. The nearer I got, the darker it was getting, and the more grateful I was for my blinking handset. It cast a sickly pastel pallor upon the shadows, an uneasy addition to the crumbling décor, but I was blind without.

Another shuffle, and another micro-avalanche of slack dirt, again from the room I was now facing. My heart pounded with a hundred possible causes. Above them all, the suggestion that I *get away*. And yet what if I moved in, found it to be benign, an orphan kitten squirming its way out from under entrapment? At the very least, I needed a reason.

And then, in the furthest corner, a human groan. A large lump of something presented itself at the back of my mouth. And still I moved in. Squinting in the murky colours. Making out the pile of writhing bodies as they lay against the back wall. One, two, three and quite possibly a fourth. My innards exploded with vindication, exhilarated energy, and a feeling approaching wild excitement. A further mumble. And *I could help*. This was why I was here. There was not a trace of trepidation as I stepped across the chunks of mortar, phone extended like a righteous beacon. All fear and caution had been abandoned, dropped for the rush of adventure as I tip-toed to their aid. Who, how, why – all were ignored. Any other man, woman or child would have retreated, at least until company or

flashlight were present. But I was fearless, Mister Adrenaline, too caught in the moment to consider properly. Too stupid to do anything other than swivel willingly in the direction of the sudden stamp-thump behind me. Too distracted to do anything other than buckle when the iron bar cut through the darkness, splintering the bones of my lower arm on impact like a hatchet on firewood.

My own scream was the loudest thing I heard that day, run close by the weapon as it sang and fizzed past my ear before biting spitefully into rock. Kneeling, I had the strength to scramble away from its flight path, tearing my skin on the ground but feeling none of it. The clanging in my brain was all for broken bones. The mobile had fallen from my hand, and lay almost face down, identifying itself bleakly but offering little else light. Through the black, I heard my assailant grabbing the doorframe and moving through. Feet scurried on the rubble in the main room outside. The getaway. I half-jumped into a standing position, ramming my head into the nearby wall as I did so. I was breathing too deeply, cursing and expectorating through gritted teeth every few seconds. I staggered out into the hallway, and back into the front room. The backlit open entrance beckoned as an old friend would, possible respite from the searing pain. I ran towards her, arms huddled to my breast like a woman first thing at morning. The sunlight shrieked at me as I burst into the fresh air, as though it blamed me for ever leaving, and bringing this upon myself. I could hear a car door slamming at the side of the cottage. I stumbled around the corner as the engine roared and spat fumes back at me. The rear window of the van was greasy and impossible to see through. My squalling eyes moved and fixed on the direction of the driver-side wing mirror, just as the wheels span and took themselves away from me. But not before I caught her face as it glared blackly back towards me.

The van roared away up the track, sending choking clouds of dust high into the haze. Somehow, somewhere, I had storage space, and the ability to identify the make and model. The number plate was useless to me: numerous digits, the year and the county code were infinitely more complex to remember as opposed to *green Fiat Bravo*.

I watched trembling until it had bounced over the crest of a hill in the distance, disappearing from sight with plumes and disturbed

hedgerow birds in its wake. I stood almost bent double, my swelling arm strapped across my torso. It stung with a horrible fiery sourness from a couple of different places, and even without the lumpy protrusion an inch below my elbow, I knew that something was broken, and broken badly.

My head too was burning, swimming with zooming thoughts and urges. I was terrified of forgetting the face and its transport. I knew that I needed urgent medical attention, and that my car was at least a mile downstream. I knew that the bodies I had seen moving in a corner of a room in the cottage beside me were still there, and now, their would-be saviour had joined them in Club Helpless.

And then my slideshow mind fell upon the tale of missing boys, and the unidentified *alive* inside. Two had definitely been abducted, maybe the others had too. The resulting surge of focused purpose was enough to take me and my damage back to the still-open door. I had pain, I had fear, I had a head full of questions. But I also had a mobile phone somewhere amongst the rubble. One phone call and I could have my needs and those of the others attended to. Then maybe I could see about the questions.

I could feel the weakness rising in me. I stumbled over a chunk of fallen rafter, my balance barely retained by a fall on my uninjured side against the inside wall. I kicked my way through the room, surprised by my own wheezing and just how much more comfortable everything was becoming. The sounds from the inner sanctum came thicker and faster, as though they too were agitated by the furore. *Sorry, you're second in line for now. What I am doing is for us all.*

I had been praying that the gremlins had stayed away from my mobile, that its faint backlight would still lead me to where it lay on the ground, glowing sickly and tiredly. Dropping to my knees and dredging one-armed through unforgiving terrain was a far from attractive proposition, but I had no choice. There was no light in the room. It took ten long seconds before I laid my hand on the warm plastic. The scrabbles and muffled calls of the youths in the corner became louder as I clutched my helper. I could tell from the wavering depth of their sounds that the stricken were males with voices not yet finished breaking. I didn't need to see the gags or ropes. There were new and deadly shadows all around me,

appearing as my moistened eyes became one with the dark. Stepping to reassure those opposite me was a noble thought, but a little too adventurous for me. I took the phone from the ground, uttered *I'm getting help*, and turned my back on desperate groans.

I moved as quickly as I could out into the sunshine. All around me, quiet had been restored, though my head clamoured with all that had just happened, each snapshot colliding with the next in a hurried dizzy frenzy. As I punched the number nine button, I was hit with a sudden sinking notion: wasn't there a different emergency number entirely for mobile phone callers in Ireland? Had that not been brought up last time I was home? The single digit blinked uselessly back from the display, and I slumped against the doorframe in gathering fatigue. I searched for the rational. One of the others would probably know, but I was not going inside. I could check at home, but I didn't want to worry anybody. I had no idea what I was in the middle of, so I wanted professionals and not family. Almost in despair, I gave the lone 9 his triplet brothers, and pressed call. Held to my throbbing face, it sang as sweetly as Garfunkel in Central Park when it brought the firm tones of an operator to my ear. My relieving sigh was so deep I almost vomited. And once the retch had passed, the struggle for coherence began.

'Hello, I need to get an ambulance and the police out to Milford. I've been attacked and there are others tied up in a cottage.'

I slowed down, I calmed myself, I did everything that she asked of me. I provided as accurate directions as I could – about a mile along the bank towards Leighlin, Killeshin side, the cottage is at the end of a small laneway – and I described my injuries along with what little I knew of the detained. I told her about the van and the driver, and the direction it had sped off in. When finished and satisfied that they were coming, I returned to the mouth of the ghost house, shouted *help is coming* as confidently as possible, and hauled myself back out to the river. There, I feel to a kneel, rolled onto my functional arm, and settled down to wait in the curious bathe of the sun.

Over the following two days, the gaps in my riverside adventure were filled by the steady flow of visitors to my bed. The police had found me curled and asleep, in grave danger of sunstroke where I lay. I had been taken to St. Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny, in the first of two ambulances, with the boys split between. Aside from the double fracture of my ulna, I had some minor bruising and the after effects of shock. The teenagers were suffering from abrasions, mild dehydrations and malnourishment, one more so than the others. This was because he had been missing since the weekend – unlike the other three, freshly incarcerated. The first boy had been holed up in the ruining storehouse ever since being taken from a forest rave up in the hills. The first boy's name was Brian O'Toole – eldest son of a good friend of mine, and boyfriend of my sixteen year old niece Amy.

I was way too groggy, too ruled by the sedatives to be able to grasp the extent of my findings. The awe of the faces, the thankful tears of women and girls – they helped, but I was more occupied with the spectacular cast on my arm. For some reason, I couldn't shake a scene from 'Escape To Victory' out from my mind's eye – the setting in which the prisoners' goalkeeper allows his arm to be broken, paving the way for Stallone to deputise in the big game against the Nazis. The *clean break* is achieved by boot over open floorboard slats. Every time I replayed the stamp, I felt the surge of electricity in my own bones. Somehow, it was more comforting than iron bars welded in the dark.

Liam and his family were ever-present in Luke's during my stay, dropping by whenever their boy was busy with doctors or sleeping off medication. When The Tool came to see me alone again on the second evening, he brought not grapes, Lucozade or magazines, but rather a broken relief that had manifested itself into many questions. His gratitude was already well-spoken, and as some kind of return, he had told me all that he knew about the insanely eventful week in Carlow. For me, there were still some holes, but he had already given me things that maybe he shouldn't have, so I couldn't complain. He'd obviously been speaking with his brother.

'And how is Indiana Jones doing now?'

'Still drugged to the eyeballs. Coming round a bit though.'

'Good, good.'

He pulled up a chair without asking. I wouldn't have objected, even if I'd known what was coming.

'Feel up to a little light grilling?'

There was a flicker of confusion in his eyes, and though I had the capacity to recall the lazy investigations carried out without his knowledge, I felt like feeding him. After all, I'd found the kids, hadn't I? Sure, accidentally, but that was neither here nor there.

'Go for it', with a mock groan for measure. He lowered his eyes to the floor and shook his head in some form of exasperation.

'What were you doing out there at all? How did you know?'

He thought more highly of my methods than I myself did. The following few minutes would change all that.

'I'll be honest with you, Liam. I didn't know. I was there by pure chance.'

'So you didn't know what you were at?'

'Not at all. Fair enough, I couldn't help being interested in the skull thing, but I knew that place as a young lad. That's why I was walking around.'

Disbelief, suspicion?

'You weren't out looking for the kids?'

'God, no. Well out of my depth.'

He frowned, and pulled together a ridge in the skin on his chin with his fingers. I wondered if he knew anything of my bunglings, decided to err on the side of precaution, and moved to intercept.

'Look, I'll level with you. I did a small bit of poking around, nothing special. But I found nothing, and kept nothing from you.'

'What kind of poking around? Why?'

More interested than angry. The bedsheet was beginning to itch my feet.

'Basic stuff. I talked to a consultant who worked on the skull case. She's a friend of a friend.'

No interest. And he wouldn't have known Jane either.

'What else?'

'I was out at Glencole on Wednesday.'

'The night Begley and Johnson were taken?'

I nodded. It wasn't a pleasant sensation.

'What were you doing out there?'

'I don't know. Maybe trying to warn the kid who was staying there. I didn't know the other one was around too.'

'What were you trying to warn him about?'

'Come on. It was obvious that the lot of them were in trouble. Two from the four that were in Milford that night was too much coincidence. I was right, you know?'

He gave me that much but that was all.

'If I were the suspicious type, I'd say that the coincidence was more you being at Glencole on Wednesday, and then Milford yesterday.'

Thankfully, he was grinning, and the rising panic in my throat stopped dead.

'Liam, above all else, I swear that I had nothing to do with this.'

He patted the covers dismissively.

'Relax. I'm only kidding. You have the scars to prove otherwise, and you're not anywhere in the boys' stories until the end.'

I had made no mention whatsoever of my awkward interview with the woman in Pembroke. I figured that it was going to come out at some point during my co-operation with the police, but now was not the time. My cheeks began to burn, and I struggled for composure. Just how uncomfortable had I made things for myself? I was an innocent, as much so as could possibly be. But if Liam was even joking about what little he knew, how would those with lesser senses of humour react?

The description of the woman I had identified as my attacker was a near-perfect match for that being offered by Brian O'Toole. About 5'8' or 5'9', long ashy blonde hair with life, black clothes, pale. It gnawed away at me that I hadn't had enough focus to positively recognise her in the van's wing mirror, but I was almost 100% sure. And I knew that despite my recent heroics, I was not going to remain a popular man when Liam learned that I had been to speak with the very same woman mere days before finding her human stash. Who knows what kind of impact my interference had?

'How's Brian doing?'

I figured that my condition granted me a certain amount of nervous facial ticks and blushes. Or else Liam wasn't willing to explore them just yet. He stretched himself in the chair beside my bed, and grimaced.

'He's putting on a stubborn brave face, but he's weak and very shaken. He's done a little talking to Colin, but that's about it. When he's ready, he'll do some more.'

I ignored the stammer that was forming.

'And the police are happy enough with the description? They're going after this Pembroke woman?'

'Lynskey? They are, if they can find her. Again, too much coincidence. She was the last one seen with him, and she matches what you both say you saw.'

I nodded and swallowed hard.

'What about the others?'

'Begley and Johnson were hammered drunk. Say it was an English woman with red hair.'

'That's what I was told in their local. They left with her, right?'

'Right. But it could have been a disguise. After all, she was easily traced after Saturday night.'

'Got you. And the fourth?'

'Saw nothing but shadows. Same as his girlfriend.'

'And the van?'

Liam sighed.

'It at least matches the colour of the van used out at Glencole. They didn't get an opportunity to look at anything else.'

Another point of useful input from me. The more we spoke, the less uneasy I felt about my involvement. I had helped, regardless of the clumsiness and the tiny secrets I was keeping.

Amazingly, I was on my own in a three-bed public ward. The cutest of the three nurses on rotation – an auburn creature with sharp birdlike features – popped her head around the door to warn of the incoming evening meal. Liam held on until the tray had been delivered, going back over each one of the boys' abduction stories in turn, eyes widened by the cold words. The kid pulled from Milford had seen the rawest deal, clubbed and dragged from his screaming girl. The two drunken clowns remembered little more than the back of a van, and

blackness. Brian recalled walking away from the forest with the older woman – ashamedly – and then waking in a dark and chilly place, bound hand and foot, blindfolded and gagged.

When Liam had left and the food was gone, I fought against the urge to go asking after the four youngsters. I didn't know if they were housed in a different part of the hospital, or even if they had the comfort of sharing a room, able to at least talk with the only others who could possibly understand. Jaded after my exchanges with Liam, I knew that I had my own batch of questions brewing, but they would have to wait. As it happened, Janet dropped by after leaving Amy with Brian. She was able to tell me that the boys had been separated, two to a room, but that they were starting to move around freely. In asking once more about the mini-heroics of my rescue, she presented me with an opportunity to paint myself as the star and nothing less. For the light release, I was grateful, and then sorry to see her go.

The next day, I went home to a hero's welcome of sorts. There was mild fussing, cake, and the suggestion that I need only ask for whatever during my recuperation. Touchingly, there was a Get Well Soon card, signed by all four, with Amy's message the most obvious: *'Thanks for bringing back my Bri.'* Though I was sure that she and he had some shouting to work through, the cheer had returned to her face, and as a consequence, to the faces of the others. Knowing the part that I had played in that made it a little easier to accept the squeamish floods of attention.

Liam called around in the evening, worn out and almost taking my good arm with him when I offered a Hennessy. It would still be a day before Brian was let home. His friends had been released into the frenzy of family and local interest, to say nothing of the media shark circle that was forming. It made for a tidy story: the boys were targeted for their involvement in a bizarre incident in Milford last June, as reported exclusively at the time by your correspondent, Smalltime McHack.

We were alone in the unused dining room, watched only by stacks of boxed crockery and board games that hadn't yet found a home. He warned me again that what news he had could not go any further.

'Absolutely. What's the latest?'

'They found the Bravo. Driven into the woods at Ballintore and abandoned.'

'Fingerprinting?'

'Better. They combed it. Traces of the hypo used to dope the kids. Deprovan or something. Prints match the iron bar from the cottage which match those taken from the gallery.'

I let out a soft whistle. He seemed fiercely determined.

'No doubt, then.'

'No doubt, we have our girl. Now, the van itself is not hers. There's nothing registered in her name. It's a rental job. Trace that back to the company, and it's in her name. Idiot.'

I couldn't help but wonder how much more difficult this would have been without the aid of the brotherly connections Liam enjoyed. What of the other six parents? Was he sharing with them too, or just the friend who'd somehow gotten involved?

So far, nobody that I knew of had made any allusion towards the kidnapper's intentions. That the scenario had been drenched in revenge was obvious, but ahead of that, I had only speculation. It was a terrible thing to ask of Liam, but I knew that he had to have already considered it and besides, his boy was now safe. Still, I shivered as I spoke.

'Tell me to mind my own business if you like, but has anything been said about what she was planning to do with them?'

He shot me a look that was surprisingly blank, and forced something down his neck.

'No, not for certain. They boys don't know, or else aren't saying.'

'You say for certain?'

He paused for a sip of cognac, and continued numbly.

'Too much coincidence. Think about it. The four kids who found the skulls out in Milford were being held only a mile away. They found lengths of rope in the van, and also in a sports bag at the scene. There was enough Depro-whatever to knock out four elephants.'

He stopped for breath, and I needlessly filled the quiet.

'Where are you going with this?'

'There's nothing linking this Lynskey to the skulls under the weir. But the good guess is that she was going to replace the ones taken down with, you know.'

It was here that his voice quavered. And his theory was nothing I hadn't thought of myself.

'Jesus Christ. You mean to say that she was going to hang the kids?'

He nodded slowly.

'I don't know if she meant to knock them out or what, but it's too much of a coincidence. No ransom demands or communications, and *specifically* the four youngsters who reported her crazy bone monument.'

'What in the name of God are we dealing with here?'

'The sickest. She'll be locked away, one way or the other. To be perfectly honest, it doesn't even bear thinking about.'

With that, he fixed me the kind of solid eye contact that begged a subject change. He was on foot, so it was safe to offer another from Mark's limited bar supply. After that, I was hard pressed to find anything that didn't link back to the interrupted fate of his son.

It soon occurred to me that Liam still knew nothing of the events that had driven me back to Carlow in the first place. Having not dipped pitifully into those particular pools for some days, I was almost also reminding myself as he listened open-mouthed to my stories.

* * * * *

It was the kind of thing each new boy would learn alone for himself in time. They would all pick up on the oddity, but pass it off for weeks as coincidence before asking the others. Their peers would giggle timidly, and then confirm that the children did indeed have something jewel-like against The Master, something to make fun of. Yes, the hand they feared and hated had its own ridiculous quirk, some kind of obsession with the number four.

It began when somebody kept track of a week in which he ended each and every cliff top playtime with four sharp blasts on his silver whistle. They then noticed that each meal he took at the top of the dinner room was aided by four slices of bread. He would bless himself four times

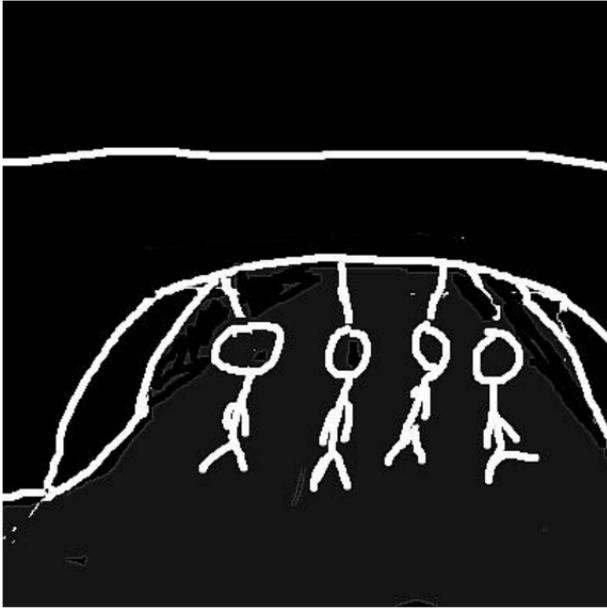
following Communion. Every beating recorded in memory had consisted of at least four strikes from belt, boot or fist; whenever the punishment required was greater, he would work in blocks of four, always ending on eight, twelve or sixteen.

On the extremely rare occasions when the hover of his hand was not enough to quieten a spirited class, if ever he was too weary to beat, he would abandon the lesson and stride slowly to the blackboard. In silence, he'd slowly etch a crude drawing in chalk, four matchstick figures dangling from the underside of a humpbacked bridge. The uncomfortable scraping on board would be the only sound in the room. When finished, he would then return to his desk without offering any kind of explanation, picking up where he'd left off after minutes of silence. The image always remained on the board until that school day had passed, a warning or a promise, depending on the nervous eyes watching it. The new and younger boys, who would not have seen this effigy before, took their time before finding the courage to query their superiors. The elders would whisper disappointedly that they could not say for certain. There were rumours, of course. Nobody could ever remember anybody telling the story, but there was a widely-held belief that The Master had hung four troublemakers from a bridge over a local river one dark evening, years before any child there was born. Allegedly, three of the boys had forced themselves upon him while he was trying to snap the fourth's arm, a reprimand for stealing food from the kitchen. The four were being starved for some unremembered but insignificant crime. The extreme conspirators amongst the children insisted that it had to have been true, that the only reason the other Brothers accepted his ways was because they too feared for their lives. Others preached that it was this heinous murderous happening that had kick-started his thing with the number four. There were variations on the theme – some suggested that he had cut the boys' heads from their bodies and tied them to the bridge, and that they still remained. Others claimed that the bodies were buried in a field down the coast that had not borne crops since. Regardless of the specifics, they all agreed that the matchstick gallows scene was used in his classroom because it brought the message to them, simply and clearly.

One thing remained certain: the eyes of any who watched his meaty fingers as they slashed out that picture would burn with its imprint

Home

whenever they closed. It served more than to just terrify them into obedience for that one class. It stayed with them for as long as he did.



Home.11

The guesthouse was nothing special, but it was cheap, three miles from town, and the owner was as old as the walls themselves. Emma had arrived under cover of evening, an unseasonable woollen hat trapping her hair, and the fruits of a hasty shopping spree in Tullow on her back. There was a bottle of black dye in her bag, and scissors to complete the new hairstyle. She'd been wearing the current crude disguise when she'd bought the second-hand moped from the tiny roadside dealership in Ballon, so she wasn't worried about being tracked from there. The van was a different matter. The muck that she'd rubbed onto the number plates was enough to obscure for the most part, but it was still too easy to trace back to the Budget outlet in New Ross, and her foolishly honest application details. Bad planning. Very bad planning. She'd been so involved, she hadn't even paused to consider the what-ifs should she be caught by anyone. Once she had the silver Lambretta in the back, she was happy to dump the van in a remote forest, deciding against burning it out. To do so would be to give up her position way too soon. After all, it is easier to find a smoking gun. Instead, she hurled the keys into the undergrowth and churned out a speedy departure on the woodland floor.

Emma went about the menial tasks in her toasty guesthouse room with a fervour that was at odds with her exhausted mental state. She stripped quickly in front of a full-length mirror, pausing only to marvel at how easily she had seduced the two boys as Jean Topspeake. She ran a bath and soaked herself for twenty glorious minutes, resisting the urge to slip into sleep amongst the suds and steam. Rising dramatically from the scalding comfort, she allowed herself to drip-dry a little before stepping out onto a threadbare mat. She potted to the hand basin and began hacking away at the damp darkened layers, leaving herself with an uneven cut that touched her shoulders only in places. Then, she tore open the cheerful Clairol box, scanned the instructions, and began inking her hair to the colour of soot. To complete the effect, eyebrows and pubic area would follow. She had a pencil and a handful of other cosmetic options if needed.

Though she was tired and wary of the clouds of fear that hovered, she was simultaneously astonished at her achievements. They

were painfully short in terms of the task at hand, but she had taken each and every hiccup in her stride, and moved forward to the best of her own ability, without falling. This acknowledgement of the strength inside gave her the courage to lie back on the bed, one towel wrapped around her torso, another slowly and needlessly ruining with the overflow of hair colouring from her head. Lying still, she felt able enough to listen to the voices that wouldn't be ignored.

Outside, dusk was fading, and the birds were headed somewhere in a large chattering mass. Emma had the weight of the summer's two failures upon both her eyes and shoulders, and she could only bear them for so long. Nothing could stall her from wondering if she'd brought the miseries on herself through the short-cuts she'd taken.

First time around, she had chosen the underside of the sluice gate instead of the nearby bridge, deciding there was less risk to her life standing in the calmer waters of the filter canal than the constant rage of the river. Mere hours later, her midnight work was undone, found by rambling interference. There was no time for anybody else to have seen her creation, especially not he who had commissioned it. Having carelessly left her camera at the gallery, she was on her way back to Milford to document the project when she found herself firmly behind a squad car. As the police led the way along her intended route, something told her to veer down one of the residential lanes just before the bridge, and to cut her losses. They too were going to Milford. It was an odd hour for anybody to be out there, and she couldn't face being waved down and asked to answer questions. She waited with her lights off for a few minutes before abandoning the night completely, driving home with a pumping heart and an army of curses in her soul. She dared not return to the scene, and read all about it in the town newspaper days later.

The second attempt – the one designed by the notes, and supposed to right the wrong of the first – it had been wrought with uncertainty right from the start. She had been foolish enough to allow herself be recognised at the forest party, but dealt capably with the interviews that followed. The anger she felt at being back at the ruined place gave her the strength necessary to take out the second boy and his screaming friend. With the finishing line in sight, she was also able to man

the efforts in the country pub with ease. All that was left was the task of sedating the boys, preparing the ropes, and shoving them over the side of the old bridge. It would have been *completely* faithful to the chalk diagram – unlike the first effort – but then again, it was next to impossible to fit bodies that long under the sluice gate. Unfortunately, when the man from the gallery came knocking on her secluded hideout, she hadn't been quick or ruthless enough to arrest his intrusion. And she had been forced to run, to abort, to begin wading *again* through the sludge of a mission failed.

Once the skulls were found, she had expected that the worst would follow. After all, that was the pattern: The Chipler fixes a task, and punishes if it is not completed. Usually, his chore brings on its own punishment, so it is a question of weighing the penalties – his against whomever he is having his pupil fly in the face of. And yet somehow, Emma had been unable to find any trace of reprimand in the second note. There was encouragement, a reminder that she had not yet finished, but no suggestion of repercussions. In time, she came to nervously assume that she was OK, that though her methods had been found wanting, he was not finding fault. He was simply telling her to do it again, and to do it with those who'd broken her first effort.

It might take time, but there would be another note. And nothing in Emma would allow her the hope that he would be as lenient this time around. No, she feared that his patience had worn thin. And despite this fear, the hold that he had on her, the tremble that he had installed in her body and the terrible things he was making her do, she still did not hate him. Even though his wonderful notes had been tickets to the beatings. No, the only one she hated was The Master.

She remembered being bent awkwardly over his cluttered school desk, smothered by fronds of her own limp hair as it cascaded around her salted face. She remembered feeling the hem of her navy pinafore as it was raised by cruel hairy paws. She remembered the relief as she was spared the final and awful horror of having the rough cotton underpants wrenched from her hide. Instead, he would punish her open-handed through the fading material, saving his fist and the naked shame for the boys.

There had been times when the pain tingled with shock, his meat fingers seeming to brush needlessly downwards, intruding. Thankfully, she had never been sure of any intention, and never feared anything more than the accidental. If there had ever been any undercurrent inappropriate to a standard beating, it had been well and truly veiled by the main event. As though while he was happy to face down his God with the disciplining of his wards on his spade hands, he was wary of having anything more sinister to answer for.

It was the second Chipler note that had brought the brightest promise. Not only would she savour the peace and the safety of having pleased him, he had promised to also point her towards details of how The Master had died. Emma craved this knowledge in a way that no addict could ever understand. She had fantasised heavily over the means to his inevitable death, and imagined how good it would be to know for certain. All the better if there was a graveside she could go defecate at.

The old woman rapped softly on the door, offering hot chocolate or a nightcap, whichever Emma preferred. Shaken from her thoughts, she rejected politely, surprised to find herself in a dark room with the curtains still open. She stretched herself generously in the moonlight, and went to secure the window. She then tugged the warm damp towels away, and climbed between crisp white sheets. Asleep in minutes, she dropped into a world where she was huge and powerful; The Master obeyed her every command in silence, and The Chipler played the games she laid out for him.

She woke a little after dawn, stirred by the growing light and warmth in the room. Hours passed as she slipped in and out of half-sleep, finally called from her cocoon by the old woman announcing breakfast. Emma pulled on the nearest clothes and washed the night from her face. She paused to take stock of her new hairstyle, decided it was too sleepy to be judged, and ambled downstairs. To her surprise, there was but one small circular table laid out in the tiny dining room, and her host was already at one side, tucking into cereal. She pointed Emma to the seat opposite, and removed herself to scurry back into the kitchen. Emma took her place timidly, a little fragile in the unfamiliar sunny surroundings, and unnerved somewhat by the days she'd been living through lately. The

woman returned with a smile and a food tray, placing the latter on a nearby trolley, and transferring its contents to Emma's place setting.

'Here's your fry, love – just eat what you want.'

The motherly treatment was alien and unsettling, as was the greasy waft from her horde of sausage, rasher, mushrooms and tomato. Emma wasn't sure if her stomach could take any. Steaming bread joined the spread.

'Your toast. Did you want tea or coffee?'

'Tea, please.'

Her voice crackled almost as much as the old woman's. A saucer of butter curls and jams appeared at her elbow.

'I'll just go get a fresh pot. This is for you too, I assume?'

The scented envelope was thrust under Emma's nose before she'd had time to react. In reflex, her fingers moved accordingly to take the letter from the woman, who turned on her heels and left the room again. Safely alone, Emma allowed the blinding white explosion behind her face to take her, the gentle curves of her handwritten name breaking through the snow. He had found her. Again. He even knew the false name she'd used to book herself into the guesthouse. She didn't want to know how.

A clatter from somewhere in the bowels of the guesthouse told her that she had to open her eyes. The swirls of nausea and terrified heartbeats could not be seen on the outside, and she couldn't ever speak to them with others watching. She had to *perform*. She had to pretend to this bustling woman now bearing down on her with fresh tea that everything was alright. She had to bury down the tide of tears that threatened to spill over her eyelids and onto her untouched plate. And all of this without even knowing what he *now* had written for her.

The old woman clucked something about the red hot pot before retaking her position at the table. Emma was desperately trying to shake the last of the screams from her ears, and forcing the wince on her lips into a weak smile.

'It was out with the milk this morning. You must have an admirer.'

It would have been a breathless and confusing babble even without the mouthful of muesli.

‘What?’

The woman held up her hand, chewing.

‘I said I found it out with the milk this morning. Must have been left there by someone sweet on you.’

The banality of the suggestion and the *olde worlde* phrase aided Emma’s smile.

‘I suppose so.’

She ended up taking a few bites of food and half a cup of over-sweetened tea. In allowing her guest-mother to natter away incessantly, the ambient sound was taken care of. Emma was only pressed into a more detailed response when the circumstance of her stay at the B & B was queried. She made up something immediate about doing research for an events company planning to do something around Éigse, the annual arts festival in town. The old woman approved, having a neighbour’s nephew on the committee. Happy with the fabrication, Emma excused herself soon after, and made her way back upstairs to her room, the perfumed letter pounding its own heartbeat in her palm.

* * * * *

‘Alone in her chores, weakened by failure, she knows that the task remains like storm water on fur. Blameless, she balls her fingers in anger at those who had interfered. Understanding her plight, he reaches his unseen hand and promises aid in the winter that follows. He points to a housemate, a boy yellow jelly, now a man of medicine, minutes from her ailment. His hilltop apothecary, the far side of village, extending its arms like a brother remembered.’

Regardless of the content, tears were always going to flow, but her lips were amazingly tasting the extraordinary flavours of relief once more. No reprimand. No need for fear. He was absolving her of blame *again*. The passing decades must have brought some kind of just and fair leniency to his game, she marvelled through the sobbing. This was unbelievable. Though she ran from the law and pretty much anybody who had ever known her face during her years in Carlow, she was not running

from him. He was *still* promising peace. And now he was offering to help her.

The language was perfectly aching, comparing her unfinished efforts to the rain left on animals after a storm. She did not have a name for the yellow jelly friend to which he was pointing, but she could certainly see his face. A boy two years her elder, a constant pale yellow expression from jaundice, and folds of fat for which he was brutally taunted by Brothers and children alike. He had been sickly for every day of Emma's tenure at the orphanage, and this much was easy to remember, but his name was still beyond her.

She was thrilled by the thought of an ally, somebody to trust and share her plans with. She rushed downstairs in a flurry of tear-drying, borrowing a telephone directory from the stand in the hall, figuring it to be as good a place to start as any. Back in her room, she thumbed through the indexes to find the chemist listings. She began scanning the names eagerly, her mind rushing with things to look out for. A name that maybe she would recognise, perhaps. And what about the location? *Far side of village* – was she looking for someone on the eastern side of town? She pored down through the short group of pharmacies, went back over them, but found nothing. A false start. No need to panic yet. She fanned to the section on doctors – a lot of unfamiliar names in central surgeries and rural health clinics. She covered the entire list, feeling only the tiniest surge of *something* in her finger as she passed one particular name before continuing to the end. Unsure but unfazed, her eyes returned to the entry, dizzy with trembling determination, almost begging for a connection. As she paused for breath, the floor of her summer-lit room became a maze of short fizzling electrical wires, each one independent of the next. A kaleidoscope of colours, they echoed the network of desperate nerves in her brain, straining to have their dots joined, and to be allowed to progress as one. Emma brought her tingling head back to the phone book, back to the hopeful. *Doctor Jas. Farrell, Achfoirde, Bennekerry*. Two of the wires on the carpet moved slowly, fusing into a new length with a soft crackle. Farrell. F. *Crackle*. James F. Tiny sparks began to illuminate her sight, as grounded fireflies striking up a chorus might. One of the two boys named James in the old cruel home had been prefixed with an F: as the other was called and beaten as James S, the children as one had

assumed that that their full names were James First and James Second, given that the latter had been a late arrival from a local tragedy. Emma's morphing neurons thrashed around like a thick python, charged and excited. There was no way to be certain – though her racing pulse suggestion otherwise – but a lightening glance back through the forty-something names took her only back to Doctor Farrell. By her reckoning, Bennekerry fell perfectly into the geographical requirement of The Chippler's code: were she a bird, she could set out from the roof of the guesthouse, fly due east for five or six miles, and surely land within metres of the aging church on the hill. She would need a map to be sure, but she was already busily scribbling the phone number down on the writing paper she'd also lifted from the downstairs hallstand.

The hastily-packed sports holdall by her bed held all kinds of useful things, and had been to hell and back with her during the preceding week. She removed her Dell notebook and sifted through cables, documents, toolkits and disguises. Finding the trusty handset at the bottom, wrapped in a long charcoal ringlet wig, she took it out and began charging up at the socket under the window. Ten minutes of impatient fiddling with her belongings later, she was perched on the edge of the armchair, knees knocking together in anticipation, sending playful bursts of energy through her thighs. She put the phone to her ear, and listened as silence gave way to the sound of Doctor James Farrell's surgery answering

'Hello, Doctor Farrell's surgery. How can I help you?'

'Hello. Can I speak with Doctor Farrell, please?'

'I'm sorry, he's not actually available today. Would you like to make an appointment to see him?'

'No, no. Can you tell me when he will be back?'

'The surgery will be open as normal tomorrow. He's attending a conference in Dublin today.'

'I see. Thank you.'

The cheerful young woman on the phone may well have replied, but Emma didn't wait to find out. She ended the call abruptly and hurled the mobile handset across the room. It was the most minor of setbacks, but in her fungal state of mind, every tiny nuisance seemed to be laughing at her. Knowingly taunting her as they prolonged her epic crusade

towards peace. She closed her eyes with the warmth of the morning on her back, and breathed hard through her nose for a minute. Once calmed, she made for the telephone directory once more, and went looking for a residential listing for the Doctor. Sure enough, there he was, *Jas. & Laura Farrell, Achfoirde, Bennekerry*. The same place. He must work out of a surgery in his home, she speculated. So she had his actual home address. The place to which he would surely return after a day away in Dublin at a conference, somewhere she could camp herself until such time as he arrived. She allowed herself a smile to mark the end of the brief blast of anger.

With a half-day at her disposal, Emma decided to head off on her scooter to take some money out of the bank. Opting for the impersonal safety of an ATM machine on a quiet street in Hacketstown, she took out the maximum €700 on her cashcard, and a further €700 on her Visa. She ate some lunch in a rustic deli and bought a newspaper, enjoying the unusually normal sensation of sitting out in the sunshine, sipping coffee by the river. As the afternoon drew to a close, she made for the guesthouse, paying the old woman upfront for five nights' stay. Though she had no intention of returning that night – fearing that the Guards would be asking for the moves of any women travelling alone – it was a handy backup to have. The old woman was delighted with the booking, and made noises about getting her neighbour's nephew around for a chat. Emma was too wrapped in her own plans to object.

After an evening meal of bacon and cabbage, Emma gathered her most immediate belongings and left the old woman behind her. She gambled on back roads and crossed the busier arteries only when absolutely necessary. Seconds short of nine peals from the church at Bennekerry, she was pulling into the parish and purring slowly past the closed gates of dusk-darkened family homes. They were all identifiable by the name plaques on their gates and gateposts, and her roving eyes moved from one to the next as she passed. At the end of the first silent country row, the richer homesteads took her back up into the fields and farmlands. She could see a couple of signs ahead, swaying ever so slightly in the breeze, hanging from poles inside front gardens. Moving on past houses with more unpronounceable names, she came to the first signpost, advertising a Bórd Failte-approved B + B service. The second signpost –

almost directly opposite of the first – bore happier fruits. It read *Surgery*. And the marble plaque embedded in the stone wall surrounding the two-storey building announced *Achfoirde*. Emma steered the puttering scooter across the road without any consideration for traffic, though there was none. Her pounding heart spoke it loudly for her: here she was.

She killed the engine, hauled open the heavy wooden gate and wheeled herself inside. Leaving the Lambretta to one side, she almost skipped up the driveway to the front porch. There was a further sign on the facing wall, a wooden arrow pointing to the left; the surgery appeared to be in an outhouse separate to the main building. The doorbell jangled, and a heavily tanned young woman with a thin mouth opened the door. Emma took an instant disliking to the smug distaste on the querying face. When she spoke, it was with a tongue not born to English.

‘Yes?’

‘Hi. I’m looking to speak to Doctor Farrell, please.’

‘Is this with the surgery?’

‘No, it’s a personal call.’

‘One moment, please.’

The door was closed over, and Emma was left watching the brass knocker for a full minute before it reopened. The man who answered wore the remnants of a conference’s suit – grey trousers, pressed white shirt and loosened tie. His face was fat – so wrinkled and folded that he reminded her of a walrus more than anything else. He wore large round glasses on his nose, and the thinning blonde of his hair was plastered true to his scalp with some kind of gel or balm. As good as the years had been to Emma’s figure, her skin and her healthy regimes, they had been terribly cruel to him. Shocked by the person before her and the incarnation she last remembered, she barely knew where to begin.

‘Hello there.’

He spoke in a warm and friendly tone, but also slobbered hideously with smacking spit and tongue noises. Emma’s smile did not need to be forced.

‘Hello. I’m not sure if you’re going to remember me at all, but we were in a home together many years ago.’

It was as hard-hitting and as decisive a way to introduce herself to him as possible. She watched as his eyes revolved slowly in their sockets and his lips began to quiver. He blinked fervently as they re-established eye contact.

'I'm sorry, what do you say?'

Emma knew that it was going to be hard on him – as hard as it had been for her first time around – so she had patience in abundance. This was a long game.

'I'm probably going too fast. Years ago, when we were children, you and I were in the same children's home, in the west.'

'Jesus Christ.'

Her sudden fear that maybe she hadn't the right doctor all but disappeared with the first strains of infected recognition in his voice. She had her jaundice jelly boy.

'I know. I'm sorry to call in on you like this, but...'

She realised that she had no simple explanation, and indeed no genuine apology. He was awash with confusion and surprise, floundering in the placid calm of the eager woman facing him.

'How did you find me? *Why* did you find me? This is... *remarkable*.'

Fair enough, it hadn't been the kind of place to engage in hearty ten year reunion celebrations. And she definitely wouldn't have been looking up (or indeed remembering) any of her short-term housemates were it her own prerogative.

'I know, it is. But I was given your name as somebody who would be able to help me out.'

His frown deepened, and gathering clouds of despair appeared across his eyes.

'Help you out with what? Who gave you my name?'

'I'm in the middle of a project, it's gotten a little complicated.'

'*Project?* What are you talking about? Who gave you my name?'

A little unsettled by the barrage of his consternation, Emma stepped backwards, and shrivelled her nose. He was not taking her well.

'It's nothing to be angry about. I just need your help.'

His cheeks burned more by the second, and his eyes carried more fear than anger.

'What help? Who sent you to me?'

It dawned on Emma that he already knew the answer to his repeated question. This was why he shook so violently in the frame of his well-to-do sunken door porch. He remembered *something*. He was asking her to speak to whatever it was that was causing him to react in this way. If it meant getting the two of them to a place where she could begin to have him aiding her great quest, then so be it.

'The Chipler. The Chipler is playing again.'

The man's legs appeared to wobble, and he would have crashed against the inner sanctum of his porchway had he not steadied himself with one elbow-rolled shirt sleeve. In pausing to give him time to breathe, Emma recalled how she had reacted when the past first came to visit. She quite probably would have required a handful of stitches any other day, but she was far too occupied with the note that had caused her to faint and gash her arm on the fireplace. She didn't bother with anything more medical than a wet cloth and some sticking plasters. And though the handsome seahorse-shaped scab would heal, it had opened another, one that would not be closed so easily by human hands. Certainly not by a doctor. And definitely not by the man who was carrying himself even more heavily than she had. He reached behind and closed the door to his home. He then stepped shakily out onto the smooth tarmac, forcing Emma backwards again.

'You... you say he is playing?'

Emma nodded, assuringly. He blinked slowly, fiercely.

'With you?'

'Yes.'

'Why am I involved?'

'He sent me to you, for help.'

Unaware of it, they were both kneading their own hands ferociously, working the awkward through their fingers and through an evening air dark with crow songs.

'How did he send you? What help?'

He was becoming more and more agitated – ridiculously so, she thought, given the fringe part she was asking him to uphold. Emma wished that she could silence him long enough to have room to answer all of his questions in one breathless effort. The letters were in the bag by the front gate if they were needed.

'The same way he always contacts. Notes. I've been doing this for some time now. It got out of hand, and the Guards are looking for me.'

His eyes widened, and his jaw dropped further into the swathes of blubber under his chin.

'*What for?*'

'I can't say. It's nothing serious. I just need to be left alone, to finish things off.'

And in that second, she understood why she was there, and why she could not speak of her undertaking in detail to him. He was not there as an assistant, an aide to her schematics, someone with whom to share her planning. He was there as a protector, someone to shield her from the prying hands of those who pursued her. Alone in the old woman's guesthouse, she ran the risk of tongues wagging and leading the law to her door. In the home of her reacquainted doctor friend – one who understood the secrecy and the importance of games – she would surely be at peace to continue her work until all parties were satisfied. For now, she had to regroup, and she had to do so in safety. The panic remained in his face; Emma knew that *she* had to protect *him*, as a mother might do for her child.

'What do you want from me?'

'Not a lot. I need somewhere safe to be for a few days, that's all.'

He began to whimper something about having a family, and Emma fixed him a sad, silencing frown. They both knew the consequence of unfinished games. Any noble thought he may have had of refusing and keeping his own from this woman's danger was banished. Instead, with heart sagging somewhere below his knees, he helped Emma to wheel her scooter around the side of the house towards the garage, nervously watching for interested neighbours all the time. His mind was doing cartwheels beside this powerful and calm stranger. She was babbling incessantly, something about introducing herself to his family as a spinster second cousin, so as to not arouse any suspicion. Though those dear to him knew of his orphan childhood, they knew nothing of the fear it knew and still held for him. How could he possibly explain her presence in their home, while struggling through his own terrors alone?

Home.12

I am not sure why, but I have always reacted with panic whenever woken at night by a telephone. Each time, as the sleep clings to my eyes and mouth, my ears are the only organs working, carrying clearly the waking bells to where I store my worry. I can safely say that never has this fear of the worst been realised. The same suggestions come flashing every time – dead or affected loved ones, an accident, a break-in, maybe even the need to help out a friend in trouble with the law. And yet for all the times I'd put my trembling hand to a phone in the dead of night and answered to no more than a drunk and emotional idiot, a transcontinental traveller without regard for time zones, or a simple wrong number – I still couldn't shake my instinctive gut feeling. That had never changed, irrespective of where I may have been. And so it was that I bolted upright in the bed in Mark and Janet's spare room when their telephone rang through the cool empty hallway that early Monday morning.

With the thunderous accompaniment of my blood in my ears, I could hear Janet murmuring to her husband in between the electronic throbs. She pattered barefoot into the hall and cut the phone short mid-scream. I strained to listen properly, beads of sweat gathering on the back of my neck. The brand new alarm clock on my locker blinked and read 3:49.

'Hello?'

There was a clear urgency to her high whisper, the distaste at having her family woken overriding anything else she may have been feeling or worrying about. The house fell silent again for a second before she gently replaced the receiver with a soft clatter. A hang-up. There were twin sets of grumpy mutters as she went back to bed, as the two girls joined in bemoaning the idiot caller through the walls. With slowing heart, I rolled back onto my good side and slid easily back into sleep.

I woke to the second ringing with the kind of dizzy, stomach-turning nausea that comes with half-sleep. The middle of the night was not the time for this. I heard the Lord's name uttered in vain, and the sound of disgruntled feet landing heavily beside a bed. Janet covered the

distance to the phone a little more forcefully than last time, and wrenched it free from its nest. This whisper owed more to venom than anything.

'Yes?'

I hadn't bothered submitting to the claw of panic that had returned. I still lay where I had woken, waiting for the noises to pass.

'Em, one second. I'll get him for you.'

Janet appeared surprised, though I was still too rooted in sleep to care. There came the hollow crack of the receiver being left on the wooden seat beneath the phone. Then footsteps. Then the sound of a single soft knuckle rapping at my door.

'Tom?'

The knock had shaken some of the daze from my head, but I still sounded off like an eager child in my reply.

'Yeah?'

'Phone call for you.'

I let slip my own blasphemous swear before thanking her and levering myself from the bed. I could hear them all stirring individually. Suitably dressed down in a pair of old Nike cloth shorts, I apologised fiercely as I opened the door to find her nightdressed self chewing her bottom lip.

'It's alright. It's not you doing the ringing. Just make it quick.'

I nodded, feeling pain in my arm and growing uncertainty around my brain. Who the hell was ringing me at this hour? Janet eased the door of her room closed, and I padded down the hall to where the phone lay. I was matching the dance of the shaking cord.

'Yes?'

I was answered by the sound of a man clearing his throat. Almost exactly as my father used to, as a younger man with no real need for it.

'Ah, am I speaking to Mister Tom Lacey?'

Despite the blazing unfamiliarity of the deeply distinguished lilt, it was one of the finest tunes to reach my ears in months. I was instantly hypnotised, the way I am back home whenever an expertly-trained female is trying to telesell me something I neither want nor need. Always happy

to let the sex in their voices flow, but always aware enough to pull out of the dream as soon as I'm asked to sign up to anything.

'Yes, it is. Who is this?'

I sounded as thick and as slow as my tongue. The polar opposite, he was matured, assure, and intelligent.

'Oh, all in good time, Mister Lacey. At this point, I'm just establishing communications, so to speak. My apologies for the awkward hour, of course.'

I felt my head droop backwards on its pivot during his soliloquy. Too much. Too easy to listen to. A little harder to take in.

'What? Who are you? What do you want?'

There came a chuckle, which vibrated through the plastic pressed to my ear, and down through my spine. I shivered.

'I'm guessing that you're a little too sleepy for anything more than the basics. Go back to bed, Mister Lacey. I have a day's work tomorrow myself.'

'Who is this?'

'I'll be in contact again tomorrow, and I'll answer all of your questions. For now, goodnight, Tom.'

I began stammering a protest, but the mesmerising stranger signed off with a click, and the pulsing of a dead line. I stayed listening to the echo of my own heartbeat for a few seconds before replacing the phone. What had just happened? Who the bloody hell was calling at this hour of the night, playing stupid guess-who games? Why did he have to *establish communications*? What was tomorrow? Still dazed, I tapped quietly on the master bedroom door, waiting to hear a reply before pushing it open with one finger. Mark rolled further into his pillows with the body movement of a man detesting interruptions to his sleep. Janet lifted her head to face me. We whispered again.

'Is there anything wrong?'

'I don't think so. Did you recognise the voice?'

'What? No, I didn't. Did he not say who he was?'

'No, he's to call back tomorrow.'

She paused.

'Was he jarred?'

'Didn't seem like it, no.'

'Strange.'

'Yeah. Well, goodnight. And sorry again.'

'It's alright, and goodnight.'

As I tugged the door behind on my way out, she called out to ask that I take the phone off the hook, just in case. I did so, and crawled back into my own bed, worn out with questions and the sleep that was waiting not so patiently to hold me again.

I woke to the sounds of tempers in the bathroom and kitchen. It seemed that I was the last one in bed, and I figured that my hero's privileges had been all but removed following the night's nuisances. 'Thank you very much, Cedric', I spat to myself, for I had vindictively – and without any identifiable reason – tagged the nightbird caller with this name. I no longer cared of what he may have wanted with me. Some crackpot looking to clap my back for Milford, I guessed. Bring it on. I wasn't worried – it was a woman I had disturbed out there, not an older man. Without the aid of darkness and a metal bar, I could handle most women this side of backyard wrestling rings. Whoever it had been, things were soured for me in Mark's home, and that was the rhyme of some clot starting off on the wrong foot.

I got up, washed, and went meekly to breakfast. Mark was long gone to the office, so I apologised one final time to the other three. Amy seemed most affected by the broken slumber, and I caught something of an attitude through the coffee clouds and smouldering toast. I resisted the urge to say something smart and righteous about the rescue of her philandering boyfriend. Instead, I fielded the playful punches Chloe got in before her mother reminded her of my injuries.

While I was still eating, they took themselves off shopping, leaving me suddenly alone with the inane babble of CKR. When finished with my mug and the endless list of school holiday dedications, I ambled back into my room, eyeing the re-instated phone on the way. I began tidying the sheaves of paper on the dresser by my laptop, and came across the notebook I'd bought in Waterford. Flicking through, I found the note made on the Bangalore incident that Marie's friend had given me. In the wake of what had happened since, my interest was rampant once again. With the house to myself, it was as good a time as any to hijack the phone

line. And hey – if Cedric was trying to get through at the same time, all the better.

I worked quickly, connecting my modem cable to the spare phone socket and setting up camp at the dresser. I chose the more obvious of the words on the handwritten recommendation and put them through a search in Google. ‘*Bangalore Deccan Herald skulls ritual.*’ The first site returned appeared to be what I was looking for – the Deccan Herald archives, stretching back a year, and the story I wanted was dated July 2nd, titled ‘50 human skulls recovered, 12 occultists held at Krishnagiri’. I clicked into the link and began reading.

It was as straightforward as any news piece about occult rituals could be, I suppose. Police had seized the huge cache of human remains from a sorcerer and eleven others, all of whom were involved in the pooja, a ritual used to appease evil spirits and subsequently procure supernatural powers. There was nothing yet to suggest that the find could be linked to missing corpses from graveyards in the region, but detectives were confident of establishing a connection in time. The similarities between this case and the find at Milford were obvious – human skulls exhumed and used – but pretty much ended there. It made for interesting reading, but that was about it.

Idly, I checked out flight prices to Boston Logan, and fantasised briefly over being able to take a cruise in the South Seas. The break at home hadn’t exactly been the most relaxing so far, but on hindsight, I might have been less well off had I been left to my own moping, without the distractions of my clumsy investigations and all that had happened since. Anyway, I wasn’t going anywhere for a while. I couldn’t leave so soon after. Even Colin had recommended *hanging around* for a week or two – an unfortunate choice of words on his part, given the interrupted fate of his nephew and friends.

I could and maybe should have checked my web email for any developments back home, but I didn’t fancy having to reply to anything, playing ‘Chopsticks’ one-fingered on the keys, so I didn’t bother. Instead, I holed a couple of rounds at Thanksgiving Point on *Links* before ambling out to disconnect the phone. I’d been on for just under an hour. Enough

to possibly draw suspicion on an itemised bill, so I would mention it to Janet over a few pieces of silver at some point.

I had barely got back to my lush fairway on the Dell at the dresser when the phone began ringing. It brought back the storm of rage from morning, and the reigns of apprehension from night. So much so that I was shocked to find myself trembling with *something* as I walked out to answer.

‘Hello?’

‘Ah, Tom. Taking advantage of a free house for some Internet time, I assume?’

The blood scoured through my ears as before. Same voice. A random and uneducated guess: in his sixties, generously insulated, predilection for blazers over polo necks. He just sounded like the type. And I’d become so used to refined English accents over the years I almost didn’t notice the trace in his. I held out for a second before the distaste took over.

‘What is it to you? Who is this?’

Another maddening chuckle.

‘Nothing to me beyond a short delay. Really, there is no need for such vitriol.’

The paralysing effect was somehow returning, battling past the shakes in my limbs. If there had ever been any curiosity beyond the sleep stupor of the previous night, it was long since buried under a shawl of hostility. And yet still something was holding me back from letting rip completely.

‘Who the hell are you to tell me anything, friend? Unless I get a name in the next ten seconds, I am hanging up.’

And I meant it. I had to actually stop myself from counting out loud.

‘You really don’t want to do that, Tom. As for a name, you can call me John. It is not my chosen name but I will certainly answer to it.’

John. Infinitely stronger and less taunting than Cedric. I watched as the insult slipped from me, like the frames of a dream upon waking.

‘John. Right, John. Fails me why you couldn’t have saved us this little verbal dance in the first place. Tell me, why do I not want to hang up on you?’

There followed a warm and easy murmur, as though he was dismissing the need for me to even ask.

'Because, Tom, I am deadly serious about that which I am involving you in. I wouldn't like to think of you treating your side any less seriously.'

The riddles were akin to red rags, and my head was beginning to throb with the needless hieroglyphics.

'Jesus Christ, will you stop taking in code? I am not joking you, I will end this call right now.'

And with that, I almost *felt* the chill on my ear as the tone of his address dropped a few degrees.

'Trust me, Tom, you won't be doing that. And if you want a measure of my sincerity, keep your eyes peeled this afternoon. I shall have something for you.'

He cleared his throat as he finished, and I damn near needed to do so myself, as my heart looked into poking its head into my mouth. I sounded alien in my muted response. I sounded his.

'Are you threatening me?'

Again, I couldn't call him any of the twenty names I had lined up.

'Tom, I am *promising* you. I don't handle anything less.'

I forced a swell of spit down my neck, hoping it would dislodge the blockage, but it swam harmlessly past. I thought of the missing Call ID on the phone, and of the report I was already formulating for Colin.

'What do you want from me?', not yet a whisper.

'Ah, better. It sounds like I have your attention. Tom, I want you to provide me with a mobile phone number at which I can reach you, any time of day.'

'What?'

'A mobile phone number. You do have one, don't you?'

'Yes', I half-stammered, by default, before remembering that it had never made it back in from Milford. It wasn't amongst the few pieces of evidence gathered, and must have slipped into the river while I was out.

'Er, no, I don't actually. It's missing.'

He sounded thoughtful in his reply.

'Damaged during your heroic endeavours, no doubt.'

'How did...', I began, before realising that my name was probably all over town. Excellent. On a platter for any fruitcake to find.

'Tom, here is what you're going to do. You're going to buy a cheap replacement phone. No fuss, ready to use from the box, you know the kind. You're going to call me straight away with the number. I'll provide you with mine just as soon as you've sorted yourself out with a pen.'

His instructions came without a breath between, and I needed a pen to keep track of them – never mind his number – in the midst of the foglike sleep that was creeping up from my feet.

'What... what?'

'Let me repeat that. You buy a new phone, and call me at the number I am about to give you. We then have a dedicated channel open between us. No need to intrude upon anybody else's house phone any longer.'

I felt myself slump to the narrow seat, my legs giving way feebly.

'Now, take down this number.'

He started calling the digits in a clear, sing-song lilt, but I halted him while reaching for the cord-pen. I let him go, wincing at the scratch of the ballpoint on my cast. It sounded wrong, like the entire dialogue had.

'Do you have that? Good. It won't wash off in time, I trust.'

I looked up slowly, panicking briefly that I would see his shadow at a neighbour's window across the street, straight from the Guidebook To Good Horror. He sensed the silence, and laughed.

'I heard it. Tom, you've done very well. I accept that some vagueness will remain, but all will become clear soon. As I say, keep your eyes open today, and I will have something for you. I look forward to your call, *tomorrow*.'

The last word was heavily stressed, identifying clearly the intended timeline for me. He signed off with the same empty click, and left me sitting with the receiver to my ear, eyes locked on the latest addition to my cast artwork, and the same dull piercing throb in my brain again.

I was stupid enough to allow each of the oncoming emotions room to claw at my senses. Dazed and confused, I was also furious in the glare of this latest ridiculous involvement. Had I not been through enough? Was there really any need for me to be an audience to some well-spoken, evasive loon? And yet, beginning to bubble away under the surface crust of my indignance, I couldn't ignore the worry. What was I going to face later that afternoon? What did I need to see in order to believe the integrity of the mystery caller?

I tidied away my things without thinking much about them, and had mere minutes in front of the teletext news headlines before hearing Janet's car pull up outside. They bundled into the house with their bright bags of shopping, their summery babbles a cold towel upon the burning forehead of my thoughts. I joined in as best I could, and helped with the preparation of lunch – a thin vegetable soup, with salad in crusted rolls fresh from the grocer's oven. We bickered playfully as we ate, warring over who got to drop Chloe up to the tennis club for her weekly foursome with friends. I seized upon the distraction, and offered my services. It went down well with the budding Hingis, until she learned that I intended to walk. I was already looking forward to the air on my brain, so I was not to be persuaded into a car.

After eating, I waited while Chloe changed into her lime green tennis outfit – purists will argue that Agassi has a lot to answer for. She mounted one last half-hearted attempt to avoid the twenty minute walk, but it was too fine a day for the car, I replied. As Janet didn't take me aside to suggest conserving the energy of her youngest, I could stand firm. Instead, I promised to allow her pick out a sports drink at the garage on the way, and off we set.

I left her under the trees at the gates of the club with two of her friends, the third arriving in a Z Series, complete with sunglassed mother and a racquet that would have cost more than the clothes on my back. I watched as the four left the cool concrete glade and made for the all-weather courts behind the clubhouse. The dead summer air was thick with the sounds of balls on strings, and I could feel sweat beginning to gather on my forehead. I moved slowly away from the peaceful shade with a frown, and out into the dull heat of my homeward stroll.

I felt sleepy as I walked, laden with the weight of all that I'd been avoiding since noon. I passed the County Grounds – Dr. Cullen Park to outsiders – where workmen were slowly dismantling the small cantilever stand near the roadside. I wondered if my father knew what they were doing to his beloved arena, although in fairness, he'd spent most of his time there on grassy banks, one eye looking out for the mobile hawkers with their cash and carry boxes of Cadbury chocolate, the other trained on the hardy countryfolk kicking seven shades out of each other on the park. I felt a pang of guilt returning as I remembered June days with a shared large bottle of Corcorans orange, suffering good-humouredly through another false dawn as Carlow bowed out of the Championship to the likes of Westmeath or Louth. Compared to the reception of my last afternoon spent with him, they were glorious days indeed. And saddest of all, instead of being free to worry about how I might once more know his favour, I was more concerned with the words of the caller John, and however he planned to visit me that day.

It was as though I was delaying any real reaction until I heard from him again. At the gates of old friends Läßple and Braun – two manufacturing plants of German origin, neighbours for decades – I was only twenty minutes from the heart of town, and presumably numerous shops to sell me a replacement mobile. But I wasn't giving in so easily. It was crazy, to be even considering pandering to the demand. My arm throbbed as I walked, and I kicked angrily at pebbles. For the first time that summer, I wondered if I'd have been better off choosing friends over family, and selecting New England instead as the base for my recovery. Heather and the heads at the paper seemed a long way away.

I had worn myself out by the time I got back to Ashwood, but I checked in with Janet and heard a little gossip about the emerging adulterous promiscuity of the platinum blonde Tennis Mom in the Benz. I then excused myself and went for a lie down, taking immediate flight to a world where we all drove big cars, and hid from most things behind RayBans.

When I woke, the light had changed in the room, and I knew we were heading towards evening. I got up slowly, and mouthwashed the afternoon's taste from my teeth. My head pounded. Janet had my name in

the dinner pot, and she shooed me from the kitchen into the sitting room and 'Neighbours'. Chloe lay sprawled in front of the television, still in her bright green kit. She flicked out an ankle-socked foot in greeting, and rolled into a half-sitting position.

'I've got something for you', she said, still facing the box.
'What is it?'

She shrugged, and reached for a plain red envelope by the fireplace. I took it from her hand as it thrashed around behind her, eyes remaining intent on Harold Fisher. A van with some kind of exhaust problem rolled noisily past outside. I muttered my thanks, and bowed to the silent voices ordering me from that room.

In the cool, locked confines of the bathroom, I watched my reflection for a moment, dream-like. I wasn't actually *thinking* that the letter was the communication I was dreading, but I'm sure the notion was somewhere beneath, causing the overwhelming panic. I trembled in the mirror, my pale white world wrong against the soft yellow light of the walls, as misplaced as the cherry rectangle in my hand.

I tore open the envelope, and removed the small piece of card, coloured the same as its wrapping. On it, there was a single sentence, inked in wonderful navy script letters; I could almost hear the scrape of a calligraphic nib as I read.

'If you disrespect me again, I will disrespect the child.'

I stumbled forward into a blinding flash, and cracked my shin hard off the edge of the toilet bowl. In stifling the scream, I bit down into my lip and felt blood swirling below. With my good hand on the huge lump springing to attention on my leg, I parted my lips and blinked at the trickle of clear and crimson falling onto the porcelain. It took minutes for the pains to fade. It took longer to prepare myself for re-entry to the family. It took ten minutes before I could add the unlocking of the bathroom door to the sound of Janet calling all to the table, and Mark bowling in the front door with his teenage daughter in tow. It took every sinew of control and restraint I had to keep the tears from my eyes and the howls from their ears. Days of pain, anger and confusion were bound in this feral shaking of mine, and still my first instinct was to hide, and to protect. I couldn't walk out there and bring this bastard's threat to their

meal. Once the winds had let go of the wires in my brain, I could start working backwards. Liam, police, tracing, help. I was good for nothing at that time, nothing beyond realising that I simply could not hand my boiling panic off. I could shove it down somewhere temporarily, talk to it later. They didn't need to know yet that some maniac was speaking of their eight year-old child. And speaking to me about her.

Home.13

The last time I felt as low as I did on Tuesday morning, I was waking on the floor of a cheap hotel room, one leg resting in a pool of acrid vomit, the other obscuring the spread of call girl cards I'd pulled from a nearby phone box. Somewhere amongst the twenty-odd Jack and Cokes, I'd staggered out into the street and laid immediate plans to match Heather's filthy sexual escapades. With a whore. Who knows, I may have even tried to call some numbers from the room, but I definitely didn't go through with anything; the night porter-slash-bouncer later assured me I'd been alone. The self-destruct campaign had stopped off briefly at Prostitution Street that one evening only, and not once since.

That morning, I'd been responsible for the puke, the worst hangover yet, and the distant dalliance with desperation. I could *not*, however, be held responsible for my reasons to be in that hotel at that time. Just as when I woke on a normal mid-summer morning in my brother's home in Ireland, I could not be held responsible for the fact that my own niece was innocently delivering hand-written notes, notes that threatened her with God knows what. And just as I'd had to face the day alone in London, with carpet cleaner and a frenzied shredding of glossy Technicolor flesh, I now had to face the day in Carlow on my own. And it was an awfully different proposition.

The previous evening had been a nightmare. I'd passed off my subdued mood as a by-product of the painkillers winding down, and ate in silence at an unusually loud table. When Janet asked if the late night caller had called again, I lied 'no, thank God', and prayed that my face wouldn't betray me. Afterwards, I followed Chloe back into the sitting room, and made sure we were alone before asking about the note. If there was even the slightest hope of coincidence, I wanted to know about it.

'Chloe, do you know who gave you that letter for me?'

I smiled, and bubbled the awkward wording, and did all the little things necessary to mask the gravity. She looked up from the remote control, thoughtful.

'No. Some woman. She came up to me in the alley when me and Michelle were coming back from the shop.'

I was so ready to accept that she didn't recognise the messenger, I almost missed that she said *woman*, and not *man*.

'Sorry? A woman?'

'Yeah. I didn't know her though.'

Which brought to mind the carefully drummed rule of parents: don't speak to or accept anything from a stranger, and never get into a strange car. Was this not taught any more? It seemed more vital than ever in these sad times.

'Can you describe her?'

She sighed, bored of the nuisance.

'She was small, same colour hair as Mummy, but shorter.'

'Very good, Chloe. Anything else?'

I remained calm, wishing I had a pen. She turned and wrinkled her nose.

'She had kinda a fat face.'

'Chubby cheeks?'

She grinned.

'Yes. But she was nice.'

'I see. And what about her clothes?'

She frowned, and admitted sheepishly that she did not remember.

'That's OK. You have an excellent memory!'

Sheepish morphed into pride.

'Do you know her?'

'Yes', I lied, without skipping a breath. 'She's an old friend.'

'What did she want?'

'Oh, nothing much. Just a little secret between us.'

Back in the dusking solace of the guest bedroom, I wrote down each of the words she'd used to describe the letter carrier. The habits hadn't died yet. Even as my heart pounded with the black fear he'd struck in me for Chloe's safety, I felt complete and utter contempt for the spineless use of this anti-bait. Why couldn't he threaten me, and me alone? Why did he have to involve anybody else? I heard a playback of the girls' discontent mumbles on the night he first called, and mapped the sound to the image of Chloe *holding* the red card. If I had been in the

market for intimidation tactics, I would have been impressed: he had my full, undivided attention.

With my head deep in the comfort of the pillows, it was clear that there was nothing more I could do that evening. Before taking my tales to Colin and the police, I needed to know certain things. It occurred to me that there'd been no hint of malice during the second, extended call. At least not until I had started refusing, threatening to ignore him. It could have been the case that Chloe would have been left out of these vague exchanges of ours, had I not been so readily stupid. Even now, she might not ever know of anything, provided that I bow to the requests of the well-spoken John. I couldn't even begin to guess what those requests might be – beyond buying a damn mobile phone – and the right thing to do seemed to be to delay the involvement of anybody else until such time as I knew more. I couldn't go to *anyone* with such gaps in my testimony. There was little risk involved in getting a phone and at least obeying that much. I could listen to whatever he had to say after that, and make a solid judgement then. If the threats continued, or if there was any definite danger to my niece, the whole world would know. I would dedicate my remaining days to tracking down this person, and eat buttered popcorn while he died as slowly and as painfully as possible. An idle, hollow and reactive notion, because I didn't want Chloe in any danger. I did not want to draw the wrath of this unknown again.

The evening passed with some feel-good Disney remake of 'The Parent Trap', and a preview of the upcoming European Championships in the Lowlands that Mark insisted on watching. Though I hadn't drawn a straw long enough to be amongst the crowing team being sent to cover it on junkets, I was still reminded of work, and that did nothing for my mood. I helped myself to hot chocolate around ten, hoping it would aid my sleep, but that was a losing battle from the start. I tossed and turned, hating that I didn't have answers for the hissing brood of questions. I hated having to hold my breath until tomorrow's tasks had been attacked. It was like watching a storm-damaged tree leaning ominously towards my roof, waiting for the words of a specialist before knowing for certain if my home was to be destroyed. The eventual sleep was thick but broken, as useless as the wool I was using to secure the tree in my dreams.

Breakfast was slow and squirming, and I wasn't able to arrest the desperate smile when Janet asked what my plans for the day were. I changed my tack quickly to lament the slight handicap of my arm, and said that I planned to head into town to pick up a few things. Thankfully, she was off to the community centre, and able to offer a lift no further than half-way. I preferred the walk. More time to think and cement my contingency plans.

Though the day would burn to be oppressively warm, there was a coolness to the morning, and I was glad of the light jacket thrown over my shoulders. As I neared town, I realised with a panic that I had been daydreaming in drifts rather than thinking clearly. I wasn't ready yet. I glided down Tullow Street, ghosting past shoppers beginning to overheat and mothers with tantrums-in-waiting. Everything seemed unfeasibly bright and happy. I passed the Nationalist office, and remembered the morning with Marie in some detail. What was the name of that awful, empty coffee place? Would that not do for composing myself? I felt my shoulders shaking as I crossed the road at Finnegan's corner, ignoring the rowdy beep of a delivery van. I counted the steps to the stone cave of the entrance to Dinn Rí – sixteen. The sign at the end of the corridor read 'Brookes.' My pulse slowed as I moved along the cobblestones, and my shallow breathing devoured the moist air.

The joint was a lot fuller than the last time I'd been in, with couples and threesomes at most tables. In the centre, there was a group of suited women, one powerfully holding court, though they would be taking turns. I was too far in the door to pull out without drawing attention to myself, so frayed pride took me to the bar and a double espresso for my nerves. I started to sweat as I sipped, regretting ever entering. So much for some quiet time to think. I had to strain to hear the clink of the spoon on my mini-saucer over the din of the ill-mannered talkers. Anger was beginning to spill and focus unfairly on their faces. I couldn't help but overhear the over-paid translucents loudly discussing their holiday plans, a common occurrence on packed tube carriages or sandwich bars in office-collar circles. The lasting impression from such staged announcements to the world is always the same: happily, they are soon to become someone else's rash.

I drained the last of my concentrate in two gulps, and slipped quickly back out onto the street. I still hadn't been able to stop and consider. The clock was ticking, and I had no more time to waste on uncertainty. Right. I could get the phone, get that out of the way. I didn't have to call him straight after, or anything like it. It seemed to be a simple enough step, one that didn't drag me too deeply into the mire. There was a mobile outlet a few doors down on Tullow Street, I remembered from somewhere. As purposely as a damp and nervous man could stride, I made for it.

I picked out the cheapest handset I could find, making sure that it worked on a call credit basis. No setup, ready to use from the box, just like he'd asked. I nervously put it on my Amex, hearing it groan under the additional weight. Another bill to pay, another unattended problem. Another matter flown from while I *holidayed* with a broken arm and a head filled by homicidal kidnappers, phone nutcases, and the wide eyes of boys who should by rights be hanging by their necks from the underside of a bridge in Milford. My head was spinning ferociously. As bitterly as I might have complained, I was as helplessly immersed in the suds of this insane summer as I had been ever since first speaking to Liam. It was bigger than me, more important than me, and everything else would just have to wait. Including all that I'd left back in Croydon.

After helplessness came anger again, and then weakness. In buying the stupid phone, I had unwittingly destroyed any determination or fight I may have had left over that day. I had given in to the whims of the hypnotic fruit loop, and bought him a direct line to my ear. I was playing his idiotic game for him. Driven by fear for a child's safety, I was jumping as high and through as many hoops as the bastard asked for.

Had I been thirty-five years younger, I guess it would have been easier to explain why I left the sunny cheerful bustle of Tullow Street behind, and migrated towards my second visit to St. Anthony's. After all, that is what a wounded child will do – seek the arms most capable of comforting. Of course, things were a little different right now. I was no child, and my mother's arms were far from comfortable. And if any of the shuffling souls along my path had stopped me to ask, I wouldn't have been able to explain why I was heading there. 'Trying to salvage

something from the train wreck surrounding me, a twisted ball of threats, questions and uncertainties that will not go away, I suppose.' It was better than a tired shrug of my shoulders. As sadistic as it may have seemed, I had some work to do with my parents, and I was pretty useless for all else that morning. If it went well, good, something small to glow about. If it didn't, there was room aboard my doom-laden carriages; take a ticket, and wait for my world to stop crashing. This time around, any rejection wouldn't hurt so much; I was getting more numb by the hour.

It was lunchtime at the home by the time I got out there. I'm not so sure that visitors are normally allowed while the residents are chowing down, but the twenty-something fresh face on ward saw something in me worthy of sympathy, and relented. We chatted briefly in the bask of her effervescence, and I explained who I was and how far down the road to recovery my squash-related fracture was. I figured that her superior wasn't around, and anyway, as she chirped, 'they're in on their own so you won't be disturbing any of the others.'

They were both sitting on the end of their beds, working through unappetising plates of salad when I mooched into the room behind the friendly Rebecca. My mother looked up, her faint eyebrows arching ever so slightly as she recognised me. I felt a warm rush of comfort in my chest, and saw her face freeze, forkful of lettuce arrested in flight to her mouth, as she noticed the cast on my arm.

'I hope those greens are going down properly, people. I'm sending Tom in here to check up on the pair of you.'

The winking nurse busied herself with the top sash of the main window as my mother directed me towards a stiff armchair in the corner. As Rebecca passed, she touched a single finger to my elbow, and whispered 'Give me a shout if you need anything' with a smile. Assuming that the attentive nature was part of her uniform and not for me in particular, I thanked her and eased myself into the chair, suddenly very aware of the two sets of eyes trained on me. I swallowed hard.

'And how are we doing today?'

My father's old lips curled into a playful smirk as he dropped his fork onto his half-eaten dish,

‘If they weren’t so mangy with the sauce, we’d be a little better off.’

It was the first suggestion of *anything* approaching friendliness on his part, and I was quick enough to seize it with both hands. Or at least one good one.

‘Nothing worse than a dry salad. It’s like meat without juices.’

‘I’d murder for a good steak right now.’

There was a sparkle in his eye, and Mother was eating away patiently, waiting for a gap.

‘And if there was any way to smuggle some cow in, I certainly would.’

Giving in, he took his fork up and tucked back into his greenery. He was a different man to the one I’d last seen in that room. It wasn’t quite handshakes and roughhouse back slaps, but it was as good as I’d known in years. As he chewed a mouthful at cartoon speed, Mother took her chance to speak.

‘Are you going to tell us what happened to your arm?’

He grunted something as a postscript, as if to confirm that he too had noticed. I laughed. And decided to not even bother hiding any more.

‘Sure. I don’t know if you heard anything recently about local kids being kidnapped?’

She cocked her head a little, and even he glanced upwards mid-chew.

‘Just what the nurses told us. We don’t really get news on the telly.’

I thought of a line I’d seen on a ‘Simpsons’ joke email once, in which the old folk are denied news feeds because ‘it angries up the blood’, and I smirked.

‘Well, they were found, four boys, safe and sound, though the kidnapper got away.’

‘Thank God for small mercies.’

‘What has this to do with your arm, Tom?’

He sounded genuinely interested, and looked it. And he was using my name.

‘Well, I found them.’

Two jaws dropped.

'What?'

'The boys?'

I nodded.

'Yes. In an old storehouse out past Milford. I was out walking, heard noises. Found them tied up inside.'

Were their mouths any wider, they would have been in danger of drooling on the remains of their food.

'Sacred heart of Jesus.'

'And your arm?'

I rubbed my working hand over the landscape of messages that Chloe had started inking on my cast. That her scribbles slept so near *his* contact number was a sickeningly ironic synopsis of how things were. I shook off the nausea.

'I disturbed the kidnapper. Took a whack to the arm, they ran off.'

As though to admit that it had been a woman would have been a threat to my masculinity or whatever ground I was recovering with them.

'Tom, that's terrible.'

Shaking her head, she seemed shocked. He seemed almost proud.

'Well, at least the boys are safe.'

'And what's wrong with your arm?'

'It's a clean break, should heal nicely.'

'I reckon you're a hero.'

'You would say that, you're a man. I can't believe he got involved with all of this.'

I wanted to go back to bathe in the heat of his compliment, but she was deflecting me momentarily. And addressing him instead of me.

'But I didn't get involved. I found the kids by accident, it could have been anyone.'

'Ah, leave him alone. What do you think would have happened if he hadn't come along?'

I could have told them *exactly* what would have happened, but I don't think they would ever be ready to hear that. Mother's indignance was fading.

'I don't know. I just don't like to think of any son of mine doing that.'

She had to choose but to bow to his determination, and my patient explaining. It felt damn good to be applauded and worried over in the same sun-drenched room.

'Don't worry, I won't be doing anything like that again in a hurry.'

After that, she moved on to confirm that I was indeed still a writer – it had always sounded more grand to say to them than 'journalist' – and not a private investigator of some kind. He remained on the topic of broken limbs, revisiting the tale of when he had slipped in the snow not a hundred yards from home, and done a fine job on his own arm. I just about remembered the furtive phone conversations around the time, but didn't let on.

'It snapped like a fresh Peg's Leg when I landed on it', he recalled, warming to the drama. I hadn't heard mention of the old sweet treat in donkeys' years, and marvelled at the sudden memory and how easily I could remember the taste. My mother was less likely to suffer exaggeration, however.

'No it did not. Don't make a fool of Tom and yourself.'

'How would you know, woman? You were fast asleep in bed when it happened.'

'Like any normal person would have been.'

He scowled, and she looked away triumphantly.

'Why, what time did it happen?'

'Before eight. I was out to the shops to get my bread warm.'

He was righteously firm. I fought back a smile.

'So what happened after that?'

'One of the Doyles saw me go from the window. Came out and drove me up to the doctor. He sent me off to Kilkenny.'

'Up?'

The term was usually 'down to the doctor's' for anyone around, given their central locations in town. This I wasn't familiar with.

'Turns out there's a surgery up beyond Bennekerry church, never heard of it before. Your man is a Mayo head, but I didn't hold that against him.'

Still GAA to the core.

'Can't all be Carlow to the bone.'

'No. Ah, he was alright, had me off to Kilkenny in no time. Sorted me out with more tablets when I ran out. Name of Foley.'

'Farrell.'

She had a game of faint smugness on her lips.

'Farrell, that's right. James. The memory's not what it used to be.'

I agreed softly and with humour, and thought of the times when it had been a lot worse, and a lot more personal than forgetting the name of some doctor who had treated him once.

As though the cogs of his mind were oiled again through use, he was then able to tell me the name of the island at Milford: Aughnabinna. He followed this with the story of an unfortunate fisherman who'd been pulled into the Barrow when his line had snagged a passing coal barge. Mother's testy mood continued, as she dismissed the yarn as an old wife's tale, and he retorted with perfect comic timing – 'yes, his poor widow's tale.'

It was a mirror reflection of the previous visit that week – he and she swapping the roles of eager chatter and sulking fragility seamlessly. Once it became clear that neither held any kind of grudge or upset towards me, I was too relieved to mind; it was almost like a show of some kind. In the home, forced together more often than they had ever been on the outside, they had come to live on each other's nerves. To be as much a nuisance to one another as the whole world had been right before it had banished them to their mental wildernesses. In the time that had passed since my last trip across the water, I'd obviously exaggerated their conditions, convinced myself that they were worse off. As if that made it easier to stay away. In reality, I would now wonder at times why they had to be there at all. There was sadness – there had to have been – but there was little point dwelling on that in the cosy lilac room. You take what you can, and you hold it to your chest or it runs away on you.

After saying my goodbyes and promising to be back in a few days, I checked in with Rebecca at the desk, a little happier than I had been when I arrived. Soothed, I then remembered the blue and white carrier bag in my fist, and the attention shifted my content sideways, like a square piece displaced in a sliding puzzle. I had hidden briefly from the

scrawbs of my day; now, I was back in the spotlight, hiding from nothing. The sinking feeling was almost enough to take me down into the bowels of the earth.

The first phone booth I came to on my way back was almost idyllic in its setting. Admirably maintained, it stood proud on the Athy Road, watched over by two-storey houses behind an old stone wall, and huge looming ashes on both sides of the road. I think I would have felt more comfortable in a vandalised, makeshift urinal down by the Post Office, shying away from the gaze of interested passers-by. It was a filthy, awkward thing I was doing, and the setting should compare. Mature grace on the edge of town was far from a match, but I stepped into the box without really caring. Fumbling, I took some coins from my jeans pocket, and dialled the number scrawled on my cast.

‘Ah. Tom Lacey, I assume?’

‘How did...’, I began, but quickly answered myself. I shuddered in the echo of the handsome voice I was beginning to know. My nerves were raw.

‘This number isn’t passed out to just anybody, you know. Consider it your personal line to Commissioner Gordon.’

The reference threw me a little.

‘And I’m Batman?’

He laughed heartily at the sarcasm.

‘Yes, yes you are. Good to hear that you can take a joke, Tom.’

One of Nietzsche’s bleaker soundbytes shouldered its way through my brain – something about man suffering alone so much in a world, he felt compelled to invent laughter – but I hadn’t it right, and wasn’t going to risk coming off like an amateur intellect. It would belittle me even more.

‘Seems as though it would do me well to be able to laugh right now.’

He made a thoughtful sound, as if considering it.

‘Indeed, indeed. Now, the brass tacks. Did you manage to get a phone? I can see you’re calling on a local line, for some reason.’

I looked at the colourful Siemens box resting on top of the payphone. I had 2.50 left on the call. Stubborn rage was beginning to rise, but I couldn’t use it.

'Yes, I have a phone. It takes a while to charge. Up to sixteen hours. I'm in a payphone.'

I had to stop myself from calling him something terrible at the end of every sentence. I had the hanging cloud of Chloe's safety to consider. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't engage him.

'Good, good. Obedience is an incredibly attractive thing.'

I grunted nasally, too busy wording my own questions to respond.

'But sixteen hours is too long. I will call you on the number you are about to give me at nine p.m.'

I checked my watch. It was 12:30.

'Fine.'

'Now, do I take it from your ordinance that there is to be no more silliness? I trust that you took delivery of the note, yes?'

I saw the knuckles of the hand nervously twisting the telephone cord whiten, and I hissed through spittle.

'I got it.'

'Excellent. So you know where we stand with each other.'

The brisk manner in which he dismissed the threatening of a child almost choked me. I gnawed the lump on my lip, where I'd bitten down after receiving his *note*.

'Who was the woman?'

He laughed.

'Not really relevant in the grand scheme, but there's no harm in you knowing. Her name is Jen. She is a *lady of the night*, shall we say. One of her more unusual commissionings.'

I balked.

'You hired a prostitute to hand a note to my niece?'

'Yes, I suppose you could file it under unusual. She'd be used to more macabre requests, I gather.'

I wanted to assault his sick mind, and ask why Chloe had been involved, but I knew that it was for my benefit. Now, I could not ignore, and I could not attack. I was his putty. I was jaded.

'What do you want from me?'

'Ah. For the moment, the number of your shiny new mobile phone. I will call you back this evening. All will be revealed then.'

I rummaged through the packaging to find the required documentation, making sounds of genuine compliance as I went. His breathing, held to my ear by my shoulder, was next to silent.

'Here it is. Do you have a pen?'

'Of course. Go ahead.'

I called out the number, slowly. He didn't bother reading it back to me.

'Superb. Tom, I will be speaking to you this evening. Good day.'

And with a click he was gone, and the payphone laughed mechanically.

I shuffled home, and started charging the phone at the spare socket by my locker. I skimmed through the user manual, unable to determine if I was likely to damage it by using too soon. If that was the case, it wasn't my fault, and I'd be damned if I was taking any blame. Through the mess of worry, confusion and scarlet anger, I had one thing straight: the next time there was any hint of a threat, I was going to the Guards. No more games.

I sat and watched a flutter of activity as a small bird took offence to the contents of the window box on the outside sill. When he or she flew off, I got up from the bed and realised that I had nothing to do. I had no plans, nothing to occupy myself with until the evening's call. I shook my head sadly, thinking of the grand and vague plans I'd had for the rental car. Maybe a day or two around the Hook Peninsula. Back to the mountains and the silence of deep Tipperary. I'd read an article on the plane over, one declaring Kinsale to be the latest millionaire retreat, and I wanted to see it for myself. Now, none of it was available to me and my one arm skills. So much for my reasons to be in Carlow at that time at all.

Janet made a pot of tea shortly after, and crumbled my self pity with a mix of gingernut biscuits and chatter. I didn't know that Liam's mother had taken a turn while her grandson was missing. The old girl was fine, but had compounded The Tool's worry during those few awful days. I guess I can understand why he wasn't broadcasting her condition.

I announced that I was going to take a walk, and Janet suggested dropping me up to Oak Park. It was a blisteringly warm day, a perfect

reason to leave the world behind, she reasoned, and wander in amongst the woods, fields and the lake near the stately house. I was sold. Twenty minutes later, she was pushing me out of the car at Goatam, pressing her phone into my hand, insisting that I call when I was ready to be picked up. The timing of her warmth was impeccable, and gratitude welled up inside as she disappeared back over the angular bridge, leaving me alone with the gurgle of a stream and the squeal of a child in a nearby back garden.

The few hours I spent out there were a tonic to almost everything, a powerful pause button on the ghettoblaster of my day. I walked in along tight country lanes for about a mile, parallel to the railway, breaking off onto a rough track which curled away into the gape of the woods. In there, I marvelled at the determined bluebells in amongst the duller overgrowth, and passed the grumpy-looking ruins of the Temple. It used to be a dare for the more experienced teenage drinkers when I was growing up, to take your cans and bottles out through the darkness to the Temple. Maybe even a sleeping bag or one of the more adventurous girls, depending on your intentions. I never made it out, but from the numerous crushed and faded Budweiser cans strewn around, some still were. It took me a further hour of wandering through the tree plantations to reach Oak Park House, long since taken over by Teagasc, who used the miles of farmland for their agri-research. I was angered to see that parts of the grounds were cordoned off from the public – the entire estate had a place in the hearts of most folk who'd ever walked on Sunday evenings with parents or lovers, and had been there long before any squatting government agency.

Home.14

There was a spread of homecut chips with soda bread when I got back, and I felt myself dropping into sleep in the sitting room afterwards, exhausted by my day and the meal. At around half eight, I left the family to their quiz show, and went back to the charging phone. At five to, I switched the battery on, and hoped for the best. Minutes later, the display burst into its bright default song, and alerted me to a private number calling, its first. I didn't need to look to know that the caller would match the number on my cast.

'Goodness, Tom. You must have been sitting by the phone, what?'

He sounded further away, and slightly unfamiliar on the network's thin channel. In reality, he was nearer than ever.

'Something like that.'

'Well, no doubt it's been a long haul for you, but here we are, and I thank you for your diligence to date.'

We both knew it had been forced. Drowsily, I scowled.

'What do you want from me? How much longer is this going to go on for?'

'Well, in layman's terms, I want to employ your services. And this will go on for as long as it takes to complete our work.'

His accent enraged me, pushing the confusion to the background.

'What *work*? What are you *employing*? Can't anything be plain and simple?'

I heard him take a breath.

'You're getting testy, Tom. That's not good. The long and the short of it is that I want you to ghost write a book. My book, my story. You are a writer, are you not?'

Not in a million years could I have been prepared. I stopped shaking, dead.

'*What?*'

'You are a writer, are you not?'

'A sports writer, yes', I stammered, completely fuddled by the shift in direction.

'Well, I want you to write my story. My life.'

'A *biography*?'

'More of a life's tale in words, Tom.'

'But I'm a sports journalist, not a biographer. I couldn't do that.'

'Yes you can, Tom. It's all writing. I have every faith.'

I had to word the next sentence with every last drop of skilful tact available to me.

'Why write a story about your life? What have you done?'

It arched away from *who could care less about some lunatic's egocentric reflections*? He chuckled.

'Oh my, you really are in the dark, Tom. I assure you, writing about my achievements will be every much an honour for you as it will be for thousands to read of them.'

I could feel the same old headache coming on. If this guy was some kind of athlete, or successful entrepreneur, then *maybe*. But he had freely threatened a child to haul me onboard. Something wasn't sitting right.

'And why the need to bring my niece into this? Over a book?'

He sighed.

'I will not tolerate disrespect, Tom. I certainly don't warrant it. It was unfortunate that I had to go that particular route, but I did. It awarded me your attention, and a new mutual understanding between us. The end justified the means. Now, you are here in the face of this opportunity.'

'Opportunity?'

'Certainly. The telling of my story will widen *your* eyes, never mind the hundreds of thousands who will want it. I have no interest in money any longer. Once proof-read by me, the book is yours to sell. And it will sell.'

'And if I don't want to?'

'Not an option. I believe we have an understanding, Tom.'

Malice ghosted into his voice like a sudden fog from sea, hurling me off guard. It was the equivalent of dangling the red card in front of my eyes. I was a hostage.

'We do.'

'Excellent. Now, I am in the process of finalising a series of measures to aid our project.'

'What kind of measures?'

'I'll have more specific details tomorrow. For now, I'll leave the floor open to your questions. I'm sure there are many.'

I paused, head whirling.

'How long will this take?'

'As long as it takes to write. If you're worried about going back across the water, we may be able to accommodate you.'

I almost began to ask *how*, but he already knew my vocation and my family – why not all else too?

'Why me?'

'Convenience, and you verily fell into my lap, so to speak.'

'How?'

'Apparent in time, Tom. Next question.'

'Can you give me any specifics of what I'll be writing about?'

He made a purring sound.

'Well, as I've said, me.'

'I know that, but *what?* What's the hook?'

'The hook. Well, Tom, you remember that little skirmish of yours in the cottage at Milford? The reason you're cradling that chicken arm? What would it be worth to you to learn that I was the puppet master behind that particular show, pulling all strings?'

My choked response got no further than my throat.

'I thought so. Tom, I'll leave this with you, some food for thought, as they say. I'll check in with you in the a.m. and we can move the preparations along quickly. Thank you for your time.'

And he was gone, leaving me with a buzzing warmth in my ear, a weight in my jaw, and some kind of scream lodged in my soul.

I could hear kids shouting as they played on the roads outside, and wondered slowly why Chloe wasn't out with them. Maybe it was a blessing that she wasn't, instead safe in the clutch of a family sitting room, and not open to the grab of a coward and his prostitute assistant. The low hum of the fears I'd had for her continued, now joined in stereo by a concern for my own safety. The hole was getting deeper and darker. What had I walked into when I stepped off that cheap Ryanair flight in Dublin?

* * * * *

I'd already made the contentious link between Caller John's interest in me and the fact that my name was all over the local everything as the hero of Milford. At a push, I could have figured that he was a sympathiser to the woman – maybe even a lover – and looking into a little phone terrorism as revenge. I would not have promoted him to the role of master of ceremonies, the control behind that scorching hot day and all that went with it. That involved him with the kidnapping of the four boys, maybe even the skulls they'd found before that. The gravity of this unbelievable development turned my stomach inside out, leaving me terrified and abhorred. He was so calm, so collected. He was as dangerous as I was now frightened. I curled back into the consolation of my pillows, asking that they offer some kind of sense to ever-expanding bad confusion.

Things had taken a turn for the worse, and for the more serious. It was no longer a case of *if* I took the burden of these past few days to Colin and the force; it was *when*. I now had more than a false name, a phone number and a piece of red card to interest them. I now had a link to the biggest story to hit Carlow in ten years. If that wasn't enough to warrant movement, damn all else would. Of course, I had none of the specifics. How, why or even when was he involved? Would this be part of his next heavily-coded debriefing session, scheduled for the morning? Would he inadvertently give me enough to make my story worthwhile, believable? As I lay deep in the body of my bed, I began to feel determination etching a thin skin over the caution and the worry. With even the barest notion of some kind of fight on the horizon, I felt less deathly and more energetic. I had found a way to channel the venom I'd stored ever since first fielding this loser's call.

Shortly after, I wrapped a plastic bag around my cast and took a quick shower, formulating my approach under the steaming spray. I could not afford to anger him, that much was certain. And for now, pleasing him appeared to consist of little more than listening, heeding his *measures*, and doing whatever it took to start his retarded book for him. All the while, I would be gathering information that could be used elsewhere. I had no doubt that he would be doing all in his power to protect his identity, but surely the Guards had their ways? Trace his phone, whatever it took. Find him and then drag him out into the kind of black underworld

I was now just beginning to peer out of. The plotting brought to me a sort of weak relief, the latest sudden spike in a summer of many troughs and too few peaks.

I checked in with the family afterwards for half an hour of mindless TV and a hot snack. I didn't sense any kind of interest in me whatsoever, which tickled me on two levels; firstly, was I that comfortable a fixture amongst them, in only my second week there? Secondly – and this was more a cruel clawing at my ribs than a tickle – they knew nothing of the existence I was hiding from them. As impossible as it was to relax in the heart of such acceptance, it was safer this way. Again, I was worn out hitting the hay, the slim curves of the phone on my locker a bookmark to my rewriting script. The game went on, Tom Lacey on board for the duration.

I woke from a dreamless slumber to a house leaving me to fend for myself. Janet and Mark were at work, and it would be an hour or two before either of the girls stirred. After a breakfast of grapefruit juice and toast, I slouched in front of Sky News for a while. I had the new mobile in my pocket, set to vibrate rather than sing. When it happened, I moved swiftly back into my room and its heavy odour of sleep. There was a virginal purpose to my walk, a double-barrelled hope of exposing Caller John and ridding myself of him, and also handing to Liam the man who had caused his family such hell. The things I'd hidden from him about my involvement in the aftermath gnawed away at my conscience, and my eyes were fixed on the prize of beating that.

'Tom, a slight delay in the response time there. I hope I'm not losing you.'

He sounded jovial, and not in the least concerned. It served to pump petrol onto the fire that now burned in me.

'I was changing rooms, securing some privacy. Commendable, I assume?'

'Of course, of course. Now, where do we stand at the moment? Are you still sceptical about our assignment, or do I have you aboard?'

There was no trace of uncertainty, despite the words. Step one, lull him.

'I'm on board. I was just thrown, that's all.'

'Splendid. And I can imagine how that must have been. It sheds some more light on why I came to you, doesn't it?'

'I guess.'

He paused.

'Tom, I'm not so sure that I'm hearing one hundred per cent co-operation. I can understand that you're still sore about the red letter incident – no pun intended. But I am hoping that we can move past.'

I obviously hadn't been able to keep all of the hatred from my voice.

'Sure.'

'Good. And while we're at this more delicate stage, I'll take the opportunity to visit some ground rules.'

'Firstly, and most obvious of all, you will not breathe a word of mine or of this project of ours to *anybody*. Not your family, not your friends, and certainly not the police. Though the temptation will be to officially implicate me in all that I tell you, I'm sure that you can understand that I'll be taking the necessary precautions to ensure that doesn't happen. And the part you play in this, Tom, is to keep schtum about it all.'

He was firm, more solid in his tone than he'd been so far. Given the time, I could have written the speech for him. Of course he was demanding secrecy. Of course he wouldn't tolerate or expect me to run to the police. Of course his first stupid ground rule wasn't going to sway me from my plans. I was going to have to be very careful.

'Of course.'

'I shouldn't have to warn you that any deviance from my intended path or any indiscretions on your part will be met by the most serious repercussions. I can not be caught, Tom, and it is certainly not the intention of my contact with you.'

I would have liked to have yawned at the predictability, but I remained cautious enough to not want to draw him.

'I understand. You want the story told, and that's it.'

The smile was almost audible.

'Tom, do you know, I think we're going to compliment each other superbly.'

'Let's not get carried away. I'm writing your book for you, and that is all. Right?'

'Yes, yes. But it shouldn't have to be a burden. I'm sure you'll find yourself intrigued.'

'I have no doubt. Now, you said there were other rules?'

'Certainly. And all of this will be documented thoroughly in a contract, so don't worry about missing anything.'

'Now, I am proposing that we do this in a manner of steps. I have set up an Post Office box number at the branch on Staplestown Town. Less eyes than the main office in town, you see. There, you will find all kinds of juicy documentation and papers to aid your progress. The key should be popping through your letterbox any minute now, courtesy of An Post.'

'Why didn't you just post the papers?'

'A fine question. I didn't want to run the risk of prying eyes or light fingers. In the wrong hands, such a package would bring a world of discomfort upon us both. Besides, I plan to have need for the box at a later date.'

'So I go and collect this stuff today?'

'Exactly. It should be enough to begin with. As I say, I will add to the pile as time goes on.'

'Fine.'

'I'm thinking that we can fill in any gaps through a series of interviews. By phone, of course. You can ask the necessary questions, and I will answer as best I can. I will record each conversation to tape, and mail the cassettes to you as we go along.'

'Very efficient.'

'Nothing but. I don't want to risk omitting anything. I'm sure that your shorthand is more than adequate, but assumption is the mother of something less desirable, apparently.'

'So I've heard.'

'And I'm placing a lot of emphasis on the need for the story to flow. No holes or stutters. I'm trusting you to oversee the general fluidity.'

'I'm flattered, I'm sure.'

'There will be a sizeable amount of material coming your way, one way or another, and it will be your job to piece it together seamlessly. I have some broad ideas on how to break the texts down, but we can go through those when you've had time to sit down with it all.'

Through the window and over the back wall at the end of the garden, I could see the postman, wheeling between the cream box houses in the new estate. It would be a few minutes before he reached ours.

'I think I see the post on its way.'

'Admirable timing. Tom, I think I've given you enough for the moment. I would suggest that you take the afternoon to retrieve the goodies from the Post Office, and familiarise yourself with things. I can call you back at around five, if that suits?'

It felt good to know that I was hiding my fierce determination, that he was gleefully believing that I had given up the fight and was doing the lapdog thing. It was the first time I felt any kind of power, wielding it invisibly above his head like a sword. I kept some fatigue in my voice, to complete the illusion.

'Sure, whatever. So I'm to go get these documents, go over them?'

'Absolutely. Make some notes, some suggestions for layout, et cetera, and we can cross pens in the evening.'

'I can do that.'

'Splendid. Tom, that your crusade may know no obstacles. I'll speak to you at five.'

Dropped into the familiar silence in the wake of his departing, it took a moment to compose my beating heart before I bowled back out into the sitting room. There, I sat in silence, watching for the shadow of a man approaching the porch, and the clatter of the letterbox. When he came, his amiable whistle announced to all the world that the part he was playing in the summer game was a blissfully ignorant one. Picking the white envelope with its computer-printed label from the floor, I took charge of the baton with more responsibility than Mr. Postman might ever know.

* * * * *

As I trudged through the dank heat of the afternoon, I marvelled at how once again I was out pounding the streets of the old town, dancing to the paradiddle of a drum not my own. The times I'd actually taken to myself lately were few and far between. Nonetheless, I had the sparks of curiosity and a new intent in my step. Of course I was interested in what

was waiting for me. And there was every chance that it would ultimately help my coming case with the police.

The Post Office was at the end of a small grocery shop on the other side of the railway bridge across Staplestown Road. My mood had lifted sufficiently to allow me exchange an unforced cheerful greeting with the old dear at the main counter as I walked past. However, beyond her, there was a queue of six or seven people at the An Post window, and I spent painful minutes behind two loud blondes and the gormless male whose attention their nasal giggles vied for. The incessant bursts of exaggerated laughter grated slowly on my open nerves, wide obnoxious schoolgirls though they were clearly passing for adults. I barely stopped short of asking that they saved themselves for elsewhere. I began to notice the tearing of my humour, and gamely tried to shut them from my throbbing temples. Others ahead of me were shifting in the line, their swollen ears also affected. I consoled myself with the fantasy of bawling out the mannerless goons, and waited my turn. Having caused myself to briefly forget why I was there, I felt a lively surge through my arms. More important.

I handed in the key, and muttered something about having to collect the contents. It hadn't dawned on me that I'd never used a PO Box before, and I was definitely winging it. Thankfully, the clerk disappeared into a back room with my key, and returned with an A4 manila envelope. She placed the key on top and slid both out under the glass grill. I took them with thanks and moved away from the counter, not at all surprised to see that the handwritten mark of my name came from the same alphabet as the red note from Chloe.

There was a junior athletics meeting at O'Toole's track on my way home. The bright colours of sportswear and the shouts of encouragement carried on the warm breeze were the only real sounds apart from the rush of excitement in my ears. It was a struggle to keep myself from peeking into the envelope there and then, though I knew it made more sense to be in the secluded privacy of my room doing it. I bit down on the swirling intrigue, and patiently strolled home.

There were four smaller envelopes inside, each one labelled with a photocopied clipping of a regional newspaper masthead. The dates ranged from April to as far back as October 1984, and the papers themselves practically covered all four corners of the country. The *Leitrim Observer*, *Clare Champion*, *Imokilly People*, and Carlow's own *Nationalist & Leinster Times*. Inside each envelope there was a photocopy of a lengthy news story, the black and white grains of the photographs fading in quality as they went back. The oldest headline read 'Local Priest Recovers After Ordeal', and the clipping incorporated a picture of said priest, a Father Rooney, whose ruddy and bulbous smile was at odds with the caption beneath. Apparently, the attack on the much-loved man had shocked even the hardest of his Leitrim parishioners. I devoured the text in under a minute, not yet sure why I was so drawn. It turned out that Father Rooney had been taken from his bed late one Saturday night. His assailant then subdued him with chloroform, and tied him to an eight-foot-tall crucifix in his own back garden. He was found the next morning by an errand boy, sent by the sacristan to find out why Father Rooney was running late for 9a.m. Mass. His night garments had been ripped and rearranged into a bare wrapping around his waist, his sagging torso blue in the early Spring cool. Minutes later, a team of off-duty servicemen from the middle stalls were working to release Father Rooney from his exhausting torment, and he was taken to nearby Our Lady's, where he was expected to make a full recovery. The people of Newtowngore were nonetheless appalled that such a thing could happen in their own yard. The makeshift crucifix had been hewn from logs reported missing from a forest just outside town, which it made it all that little bit more local.

With pulse hammering away in my captured ears, I moved hungrily onto the second clipping. It proved to be infinitely more straightforward and nowhere near as sinister as the first. A stark image of a burnt-out building surrounded by metal fencing sat alongside the headline 'Arson Attack Guts New Church'. On the very night before the people of Shannon celebrated the opening of their brand new church, the just-finished building had been the subject of a calculated arson attack, which flamed the impressive structure beyond repair. There was understandable outcry from townsfolk and politicians, and sadness from the parish team. The acting superintendent promised that the 'jobs

responsible' would be brought before the law, but the festering suspicions in my mind shook their head knowingly at such a notion.

The third clipping was the largest, and the tale it told was almost unbelievable. Not alone in the specifics of the incident, but also in that this was the first I had ever heard of it. It seemed unfathomable that news of this had not made it across the water. On a gloriously warm Friday in June 1996, the pupils of St. Clare's, Youghal – a secondary school for girls, within screaming distance of the old arcades – were looking forward to the weekend, and then the summer holidays a little beyond. Just short of 10a.m., as the individual classes settled down for the second period of the day, a 'darkly sweet' gas was released into the recently-upgraded ventilation system. The Gardai experts would later announce the gas to be a deadly combination of benzyl bromide and chlorine. When the choking began, the alarm sounded, though it took vital minutes to raise the fire brigade, and longer still to clear the school. By one o'clock, when the girls should have been defying the orders and strolling down to fraternise with the boys from Colmcille's, they were sprawled on the grass lawns of the school, or heading to Cork and Waterford by ambulance. Or worse. At the accountable end of the assault, three girls lay dead, two locals and a German national. Twenty-five of their schoolmates were treated for serious inhalation problems, and fifty more for a variety of minor complaints.

Numbly, I pulled out the fourth clipping, and the recognition darted through my spine and out through the hairs on my head. I didn't believe that I could have missed it first time around, when I had read the name of the newspaper and the date underneath. The final clipping in this chronicle of *wrong* was from the same paper I'd read in the Nationalist offices on my first full day back in Carlow: *there* were the Guards in their jackets, *there* was Milford in its wet sulking splendour, and *there* was the connection that Caller John was laying out for me.

* * * * *

Given the assumption that Lynskey had intended to take the lives of the four boys in completing her Milford skull game, the previous three incidents no longer seemed so huge. I throbbed with the

possibilities. Was she *his* henchwoman, carrying out each of these assaults on innocents? How the hell could he possibly control a person to the point where they would slaughter on his command? Were there more newspaper clippings to come? Why had I been dragged into all this, and why had I agreed to help write a *biography* of a man more dangerous than I had yet feared? The threat above Chloe hung more heavily than before.

I spent the remaining hours of the afternoon in a daze, affected by the heat and the weight of the articles I couldn't stop re-reading. Four smallish communities, shocked and wounded by their individual outrage. Three attacks with links to the Church – one more tentative than others – a priest, a church, a school still part-manned by nuns. And weren't the skulls in Milford removed from old graveyards, church resting places? I was overwhelmed by the possible chain. The Catholic Church had taken quite a battering from the 1990's onwards, paying the price for earlier decades of abuse and neglect, but those responsible and still alive had answered to courts of law, and not the hands of madmen. Was that what this was, an all-out attack on the past?

My head was heavy with questions and slow in response when he called, at five. After days of promise, this had finally become too much. Though the Pope himself probably couldn't recognise me as a God-fearing Catholic, I could not be involved in documenting a crime spree against the Church, regardless of whatever excuse lay behind the serial revenge. It would take every drop of effort in me to play out this latest phone call, retaining the ruse that I was reliably and completely on board. Whereas in fact I was pulling open the door of the caboose, and eyeing longingly the treacherous leap to the long grass of safety, to where I needed to now jump to.

He was excited, eager to hear my response, the way a parent might watch for a child's face when surprised with a present. The callous cold detachment held me at arm's length briefly, before I remembered who I was talking to.

'So, Tom, what do you think?'

The dull and lethargic haze remained wrapped around my senses, slowing all of my movements and my responses. The clippings still lay spread out on the bed.

'I think I need more answers.'

I sounded neutral. It was the best I could have hoped for, pale against his joviality.

'Sure, sure. How can I help?'

I swallowed, feeling my heart in my throat.

'Was all this you?'

'You mean was I involved in the incidents? Yes.'

No surprise.

'You said that you *controlled* Milford?'

'And you're wondering if I did the same elsewhere? Yes, yes I did. My hands weren't sullied in any way, but I was behind each project.'

'And you want all of these in your book?'

'Of course. Integral parts of the plot, don't you know? Lost without them. I have kept intricate accounts and records, all of which will aid your efforts.'

I rubbed my eyes viciously, tired.

'Were there others?'

'A few. Not quite as high-profile, though. We'll get to those.'

'So why send me these? Because they're high-profile, I should know them?'

'Not at all. These four are connected in a way that none of the others are. Unique and not without their meaning.'

I braved the rapids of his pride.

'Would that be an assault on the Church?'

He chuckled, somehow deflating me.

'My, someone's had his Holmes hat on today. No, Tom, I'm afraid it's not quite as straightforward as that. Which works out well for the readers, don't you think?'

'What is it then?'

He cleared his throat softly.

'Did the locations of the four incidents mean anything to you?'

'No.'

'Link them.'

I had to pause to even remember the place names. Milford, Shannon, Youghal and somewhere in Leitrim. I couldn't think.

'Four provinces?'

He tutted.

'Shameful geography, Tom. No, only three of four would be covered, Munster twice over. Try connecting the points instead.'

'Points?'

'Yes. Their positions on a map. Join the four dots.'

'I don't have a map.'

'Do it mentally, Tom. You should know the position of Carlow. Shannon is due East. Youghal is on the south coast, and Newtownmore is due North of that.'

It was next to impossible to visualise, but somehow his words shifted the jigsaws of colour in my brain.

'A diamond?'

'Very good, but wrong. Try the vertices instead of the outer lines.'

'What?'

'Try connecting on the inside.'

'A cross.'

'Excellent. But not just any old cross.'

'What cross?'

'I'm sure you'll enjoy the delicious irony, Tom. The four points, when connected, represent an inverted cross.'

I was smacked momentarily by shock – a stock response – before slipping warmly back into disgust.

'Isn't that a little too sixth class to be Satanic?'

He burst into generous laughter. I hated the sound.

'Such a way with words. If your writing is anything like as sharp, you'll be a rich man soon. Yes, yes it is, you've caught me out. I had no such intention when choosing places. It's all a glorious coincidence. I'm sure we can tip our hat to it somewhere in the text, take advantage of the humour.'

'*Humour? Are you serious?*'

This time, I wasn't able to arrest myself. Thankfully, he laughed it off.

'Come now, Tom. Even you can see the funny side of that. It's almost superbly apt. You made the Church connection yourself, didn't you?'

'What is your problem with the Church? The obvious?'

He paused, audibly stroking his chin.

'Hmm, that's definitely another day's work, and a different section of the book entirely. We'll come back to it. No, these four events are linked in another way entirely. We'll get to that also. All in good time.'

I was laden with a mixture of anger, caution, distaste and curiosity – a mixture that was becoming all too familiar. I had to stay on his right side for a little longer.

'Did you do *any* of these things yourself?'

'No. I oversaw them. I guided. They are still mine.'

'Why don't you do things yourself? Why involve others?'

'Because the involvement and the control of others is part and parcel of the experience, Tom. I don't expect you to understand, so ask your questions.'

'What are you saying, that you *enjoy* controlling people?'

'Oh, who doesn't? I adore control. I live and breath for the opportunity to work others in awkward situations. That is my coffee, my filter tip, my whiskey. I have spent my life at this game, and it is what I was put here to do and do well. Knowing that these trapped rats are too scared to ever speak of me is a drug in itself.'

I had to draw breath myself.

'And this is what you want me to write about?'

'Tom, it would be an awful waste of my efforts if the world never knows my tale. It is one of genius and triumph, if I may blow my own horn for a second.'

'Go right ahead.'

'It might seem a little pompous, maybe even arrogant. But I have my roots in nothing, and that nothing taken away from me. I have grown and risen, despite the life around me.'

'How fantastic for you.'

He paused the self-inflating flow, deflected by the sarcasm that I just couldn't help.

'Tom, if you weren't yet so unfamiliar with the particulars, I'd be a little miffed by your attitude.'

'You would? Well tell me; did your awesome rise to power *have* to involve the suffering of others? Why did people have to hurt, to die?'

He replied with all the surprise of a man asked why he had pulled out an umbrella in rain.

'Tom, why should I be the only one to suffer? Why should not others be there with me?'

'But why? *How?*'

'I strike at the happy, the open. Happiness is happily the least suspicious of emotions. It's incredibly easy when you know how.'

In these last few responses alone, he had managed to capture the scale of distance to the mind of a lunatic, and the ridiculous blueprint to which I was supposed to adhere. *I suffer, therefore others suffer*. It might have sounded well in Latin, something-something-ergo-something-something. Maybe even the title of his book. It was the most dangerously selfish thing I'd heard in a long time. I may well have felt differently had I not been an hour or two away from taking his story to the Guards.

We played out the conversation with little else gain, though he warned me away from doing any of my own research on any of his incidents. The clippings were for effect, he confided, and glaringly full of holes. I would be getting the insider account of each. He also insisted that I keep to the documents and information that he was giving: he didn't want the genes of our operation weakened by outside influence. He left me with a task – to prepare a draft chapter treatment based on the four incidents – and suggested that we cross-compare when we spoke again the next day. The tape of the current conversation would find its way to me over the coming days, the creepiness of the organisation beaten down by the knowledge of where I was going next.

I thought about using the warm handset in my palm, but caution prevailed, paranoid that maybe he would call back immediately. Just to make sure that his line was exclusive, and always open to him, as he'd demanded. Instead, I moved out into the hall, dialled Liam's number, and stretched the phone cord into Mark and Janet's room.

'Liam, it's Tom.'

'Tom, how are you? How is the arm doing?'

'Grand, grand, getting there. How's Brian?'

'Same as yourself. Recovering. More like his old self.'

'Good, good. Now, listen to me, I have a favour to ask.'

'Ask away. If I can, I will.'

'Right. Well, I need to speak to yourself and Colin, as soon as possible.'

There was a pause, while he probably computed the possibilities.

'What about, Tom?'

'I'll explain it all when I see you. Any chance we can do this tonight?'

'Tonight? I'd say so, yeah. I know he's watching the England game – I just got a text from him there at half-time.'

'That's over in – what – half an hour?'

'It is. I'll send him a text now, make sure he's around. If not, I'll call you back.'

He sounded suddenly hurried and worried. I wondered if his mind moved like mine in these latest days.

'Grand. Will you drop over, or do you want me to?'

'I'll pick him up and come on over.'

'OK. Em, this is going to sound weird, but can you get Colin to duck down in the car, maybe the backseat?'

I could hear the tremble in my voice, and feel it in the plastic.

'What?'

'I know, I know. I can explain it later.'

'You want me to *hide* him? What for?'

'Liam, I can't say much now. Just trust me. Please.'

My growing desperation echoed his clouded disbelief. I needed his co-operation every bit as much as he needed clarity.

'Tom, does this have anything to do with what I think it does?'

The slightest hesitation on my part gave it to him: my answer was unnecessary.

'Yes. Now can you help me out?'

It was his turn to shudder, days of worry and relief now seeping into an action.

'Sure thing. I'll be over in an hour, with or without the brother.'

I would have voiced the absolute need for Colin to be there, but I left it alone; Colin himself could have been playing against England and Liam would have pulled him from the pitch for this.

'Good man. I'll tell you everything then.'

'You had better, Tom. I mean it.'

I took the parting shot willingly on the chin. People tend to lash out at the near in the dark. He mightn't feel the same when my story is told.

Mark arrived in from work, and sat himself down in front of the game, amid scowls from daughters annoyed that their soaps had been shunted around to make room for football. Given that my clock was now aligned closely to the second half, I joined him, and grasped the opportunity to hide from the million words bursting to get out. Only once did I have space to stop and consider that I could and perhaps should have been covering the game for the paper, but oddly enough, this time I didn't care. There was something else to cover.

An hour later, I was standing at the front gate, the family told that I was off for a pint with an old friend. Liam pulled up in his grey-green Astra, eyes fixed nervously ahead as I climbed into the passenger seat. I nodded to him, and from the corner of my eye saw Colin lying awkwardly on the backseat.

'I'm going to give you every opportunity to explain why you have me like this, Tom,' he uttered with no trace of humour.

'I won't need much,' sideways.

Liam pulled off, out towards the mouth of the estate.

'Where do you want me to go to?'

'Just somewhere quiet, private?'

'The Cocks?'

The Fighting Cocks was a solid roadside pub a couple of miles outside town.

'Preferably not with people.'

'Top of Killeshin?'

'Sure.'

We drove quickly around the outskirts of town, across the Barrow, and began the slow climb up Killeshin. Turned off at the community school, passed the old reservoir and the dancing board, came out at the lip of Rossmore's bleak hilltop moors. We drove in virtual silence, broken only by Liam's terse updates on the tourism push up the hill, and Colin's request to sit upright. I had determined pretty quickly that we weren't being followed, so I gave him leave.

Colin had always been a little shorter than me, and had retained the good build of his twenties. Only his hair truly announced his age, a rich grey upon a farmer tan face. The smiling craters of his dimples betrayed professional excellence: you don't rise through the ranks as quickly as he had by being either a soft touch or a mook.

We parked in the small clearing just across from the ornamental statue of the Virgin Mary, a beacon of faith in this most wild of settings. We were a good two miles away from the venue for Brian's ill-fated rave, enough to not even mention it. In the valley below, all of Carlow lay sprawled, its festering town limits creeping further and further across the countryside. It had always been a breathtaking view, and now was no different, brief respite from the matter at hand. And then Liam killed the engine and turned to me with a face that demanded to hear all, and now.

I shifted in the seat, feeling a great need to be able to look both in the eye in turn. They didn't flinch.

'Boys, I don't know how to start this, so I'll just go. Over the past few days, I've been getting phone calls from a guy who claims he was behind the kidnappings. He's gotten it into his head that I'm a writer, and wants me to document it all. Earlier today, I was given newspaper cuttings from other stuff he's done. He's burned down a church, hung a priest from a cross, and gassed a bloody school. I'm obviously not supposed to be saying anything to anyone, but I can't do this. I need your help, Col.'

I had to stop and breathe. My mind raced, trying to figure if I had covered the main points. Colin spoke first, apparently unmoved and efficient.

'Let me guess. He's come to you because you found the boys?'

I nodded, swallowing a gulp.

'Just a coincidence that I'm a journalist.'

'But it was a woman in Milford?'

'It is. It was. He *controls* the people carrying out the attacks. I am not kidding, this guy is dangerously deranged.'

Liam sat a little further forward, and I caught his stare. There was a new steel blue in his eyes, the cold shade representing the freezing of trust. My pounding heart sank.

'You said a few days. How long have you known about this?'

'I've only known about Milford since yesterday, honestly. And I couldn't say anything. It's too risky even now. That's why I had Colin here duck down in the back, in case we were being watched.'

'You may have been quicker to open your mouth if it was your own kid involved.'

He was adamant that I had wronged him. I was desperate to move beyond the needless blame, and find out what could be done.

'For Christ's sake, Liam, he had a hooker *hand* Chloe a note threatening her, just because I gave him some lip at first. What do you think he'd do if he knew I was talking now?'

Horror spread across his brow.

'I don't know. I'm sorry.'

He turned to face Colin, as if to target his energy on finding out what next to do. His brother seemed to slow down as he thought. He'd produced a small plain notepad and pen.

'OK, we're going to go through this slowly, let me take some notes. Anything you can give me about him?'

Sensing progress, I sighed in relief.

'I have a mobile phone number. He's older than any of us, well-spoken, maybe a slight English accent. Answers to the name of John, though that's not his name.'

Colin was scribbling furtively.

'Good. And where do you stand at the moment? He calls you?'

'Yes. He got me to buy a new mobile – a dedicated line. There's also a PO Box in Hoseys; that's where he left the clippings. And he said something about taping the phone interviews and sending them on.'

'Organised. When did you hear from him last?'

'Just before ringing Liam. He called to make sure that I got the clippings.'

'And when do you expect to hear from him next?'

'Tomorrow. He wants some kind of treatment for chapters.'

'Can you give it to him?'

'What?'

'Can you do what he's asking?'

'Sure, given a few hours.'

'Good. Keep going as normal for the time being.'

'And?'

‘And nothing. I’ll take everything you can give me tonight, and do some digging tomorrow. I’ll come back to you both with whatever I have, but we’d all rather go at this one without raising suspicion.’

Liam and I both nodded at the face of firm and stern calm. He was the skill to our earnest intention. I willingly accepted that I knew nothing of police work, that I should do no more than what I was told. I also knew that kilograms would lift from my shoulders when this hilltop debriefing was over. People say that a problem shared is a problem halved; in this case, sharing the problem had prised its greasy fingers from my throat, and allowed me to breathe again.

We remained at the silent outpost for a further twenty minutes, and I answered everything that was thrown at me. The motives. The other crimes. Colin took names and numbers from the clippings in my pocket. Fingerprinting was an option, but mine were all over them, and the handler sounded too careful to be careless. They could check security tapes at Hosey’s but there was every chance he was using messengers for the drop-offs. Colin arranged to check back in with me at lunchtime the next day with whatever updates or news he had. I asked if keeping it low key was an option – the more who know, the easier for him to find out, I reasoned – and he agreed. He’d run some technical things past his people, get some advice. Slowly at first. When he finally snapped the notepad shut, he had countless new pages of scribbles. Each word brought me closer to the normality of peace.

* * * * *

He had serenaded her sleep with whispers of questions, asking that he be allowed step from behind his tree to watch the fair maiden bathe. His shadow promised no menace as it pointed towards the room next door, and she saw that he wanted no more than to watch. The girl would come to no harm, and to no touch. Emma could not be involved in bringing any more pain than that which she had already signed up for, and she knew that he knew this. She crawled from her bed that night and found the lock on her window not set; though closed, it offered the route he may or not have had to her dreams.

Instead, her conscience sang freely as she laced the young French woman's coffee with the crushed sleeping tablets from her pocket. Her doctor friend had been most understanding when Emma complained of sleepless nights. With the master and mistress of the house away at a social outing over on the hill, it was only the children raising eyebrows as Monique slouched off to bed before they did, begging that the girls followed obediently once their 8p.m. movie had finished, trusting Emma to ensure it. When the house had finally fallen quiet, Emma crept into the room beside hers. She turned the latch on the old window, eyes tightly shut for fear of an unfamiliar shape in the garden. Once his access had been secured, she padded back to her waiting bed as fast as her shaking legs would carry her. She slipped the last of the pills into her own mouth, knowing that to remain awake would be to spend hours wondering if every nighttime creak was him at play.

The morning yawned with a drama, and the end of her welcome at that house. Monique had groggily rustled the courage to apologise to the master for sleeping in so heinously, before breaking down and spilling her tearful dilemma. She felt as though she had been drugged, and had woken from the deepest hallucinogenic dreams to find her naked glory on display. The bed sheets had been folded down, covering only her ankles, and her cotton nightshirt unbuttoned completely, opened back on her arms. The matching yellow trouser bottoms she wore had been slid from her hips, down as far as her knees. There was a horrible cold prickle across every millimetre of exposed skin, the deathly chill that rests on toes sticking unseasonably out from under duvets in winter. Of the swirling visuals from her dreams, two remained. The first, an image of a woman at her window; Monique had thought that she recognised the figure and its whispered mantra of *you mustn't watch*. She had tried to voice a query, but her tongue was thick and heavy with sleep and its recent new piercing. The second snapshot was of a man at the same place in her room.

When the doctor took the two women to check the nanny's room, they found the window pulled shut, but the clasp gaily free. No, she had no sensation of having been touched anywhere, she answered in tremble. And when she looked at Emma, she looked with eyes that screamed of accusation. The doctor too had something unusual in his blues, and Emma knew that a talk was coming. To save the French girl

from *knowing* it had happened, she feigned horror and flatly denied any involvement. There were shouts, and garbled foreign streams of confusion. When the girl had gathered her composure, Emma joined the doctor in her own room. He was as nervous as she was unhappy at having almost been caught.

‘If it was Monique alone, I wouldn’t feel the same. But I have my own to worry about. I can’t let you stay here any longer. I know that you understand.’

Emma nodded, feeling a sudden rush of anger towards the jibbering nanny.

‘I do. Thank you.’

‘Do you have somewhere to go?’

She wasn’t sure if the concern was for her, and decided to doubt it.

‘Not yet. Probably a guesthouse for the moment.’

Her mind was quickly elsewhere – a parting shot for *Monique*: she knew that the keys to the foreigner’s small van were always kept in the red velvet jacket in the hall. Emma would need a car, and she knew too that James Farrell would turn a blind eye if it meant the end for him.

Not knowing most of what she ran from, she supposed that he was protected. It no longer mattered; an hour earlier, the eldest daughter had allowed Emma to check her e-mail on the iMac in her bedroom. Even without opening the only new mail in her account, Emma knew what it would be. Her next set of elegantly-composed instructions. The beginning of the last play in the game that had taken her life from her. Failing him now was impossible, both for her own safety, and for the peace that was within clasp distance. She printed off the mail without reading and stuffed it into the first piece of stationary to hand. With thundering heart, she pocketed the peach envelope, putting off the moment until she had time to herself. She went downstairs to breakfast, forgetting all about the night’s stealth until the sleepy au pere joined them at the table.

Home.15

Amazingly, I slept every bit as lightly that Wednesday night as I did any of the previous few. I guessed that this time it was down to being over-tired, weakened by my mental exertions. It didn't stop me from feeling aggrieved when I woke early to the sound of Mark scuttling in the bathroom, my eyes swollen and slow with sleep.

After a handful of ill-fated attempts to drop back into slumber, I gave up, and allowed the importance of where I was to take me by the shoulders, and shake me fully awake. Police investigation, and here I was, playing out the part of the wire-wearer. I could only imagine the complexities of the plans being drawn up by Colin and his colleagues, and yet I had complete faith in them. Caller John was going down, and it was no more than a matter of time. In the wake of the cast on my arm, the midnight phone calls, Chloe's threat, even just having to listen to the twisted idiot speak – I positively drooled at the prospect of him getting what he deserved. It was impossible to think of him managing to evade.

I dressed and had some breakfast alone. Back in my room, I switched on the laptop and took the clippings from a hidden pouch in my bag. Following Colin's suggestion, I wanted to have something for our prey when he checked in again. It was harder than I expected, given that I had such limited material to work around, and the best recommendation I could come up with was to dedicate separate, unique chapters to each of the four incidents. Same format and structure, somehow identifiable as connected. Even reading the second, the reader would know that there was something different about these attacks. I weighed the conscience of the horrors I was moulding against the end product of helping ensure that he would do no more. I couldn't stop my mind from wandering, to wonder about the means and the science that would be used to find him. I was excited by the thought of the technology, though of course I knew nothing. I wanted to be there as the law claws closed in, but I would have to make do with my role. It was a quantum leap from the guy who had gone to interview Emma Lynskey and not known what to say. Reminding myself, I remembered Liam's face in the car up Killeshin, and felt a new twinge of conscience.

Colin called at half-ten, and asked if it was convenient to speak. I took the house phone into the master bedroom, and told him to go. He offered that maybe I might need a pen to make some notes, so I rushed back to the guestroom, adrenalised.

He began by insisting that what he would share went no further, though followed by claiming that the first update wasn't exactly super-confidential stuff. Given the events of the past week, Lynskey had already been under investigation, and Colin had some of her background for me. Probing across a variety of boards and bodies had revealed that she'd spent years in Paris, training at a gallery in the Vellieux district before returning home to Ireland, where she took advantage of a government grant to open the first of her galleries, in Bray. Going further back, she'd been orphaned practically at birth, parents dying within a month of each other. She'd spent time in children's homes before finding foster parents, whom had also passed on. Aside from excelling as a student and an entrepreneur, her adoptive life had been reasonably uneventful. I scribbled away as Colin spoke, watching the page fill out with his details.

'So you're saying that there's nothing yet to link her to anything?'

'Well, we can link her to the kidnappings right enough.'

He sounded puzzled. I felt my cheeks burn.

'No, I meant there's no-one sticking out from her past? No suggestions?'

'Ah. No, nothing so far. It's ongoing.'

'Right. Anything else?'

'I do, but I'll be making it quick. I've to be in three different places in ten minutes.'

'Shoot.'

'Right, well, we have the same kind of background check on the three people who are supposed to have carried out the other attacks.'

I remembered Caller John's request that I veer away from any of my own research, and I grimaced in defiance.

'Go on.'

'Now, the interesting thing is it'd take a talented man to be able to talk to any of them.'

'Really?'

'Indeed. The church-burner, from Shannon – he was found in a squat in Limerick. Topped himself, apparently. Blew his own head off,

which made the ID next to impossible. Some kids from an estate near the church had him near the fire on the night, didn't hang around to see the show, so there's your suspicion.'

'Wow.'

'Second up: the guy with the gas in the school? Caught and jailed, quickly moved to an institution when they realised they had a mental case on their hands.'

'How so?'

'Is gassing a school not enough for you?'

'I suppose, yeah.'

'He went for a couple of wardens and other prisoners. Dirty protest, hunger strike, incessant babbling. Safer for all in the big house.'

'Christ.'

'Freshly laid off from the big plant in Clonmel, hence the access to chemicals. Took his fury out on the school. Took twenty years in the end.'

I could hear him hurrying. My shorthand was barely able to keep up.

'And the third?'

'Missing. Priest had no problem identifying him. They found some of his clothes by a lake just outside town, so there's every chance that he went for a swim and didn't come out. Nothing ever recovered, though.'

I let out a low whistle.

'And now Lynskey's on the run too?'

'Sure is.'

'Colin, any idea at all what you're dealing with?'

'None. It's not exactly cut and dried so far. But we're working.'

The receiver was barely back in its cradle when I felt the mobile going off in my pocket. I rushed back across into the guestroom to take the call, instinctively. I was reactively nervous at first, wondering if there was any possible way he could know that I'd been to speak with Colin, but there was no need. He was dismissively apologetic, maintaining that his mind was teeming with ideas – 'a million to a minute.' He wanted the whole thing done, dusted and displayed on shelves in Eason's; realistically, he wanted me to have as clear an image of the project as he did. He needed the tale to glide effortlessly from childhood and dormancy to his

achievements. He mused self-introspectively about the methods he'd employed so far: sure, he had me on the job, but could he really measure my enthusiasm for such a vague undertaking? I didn't have to lie. I fell into the character with consummate ease. Timidly resigned initially into writing his book, disturbed by the crimes, but undeniably curious and interested in the gaps. It was a fictional continuation of the person I'd actually been right before the decision to speak to Colin. I tapped into everything – the anger, the excitement, the swelling righteous glee. It was working, because each satisfied coo from him meant that I was answering his stupid questions appropriately.

'I was still slightly distanced because I didn't know enough of the background, the circumstances. We reasoned that names could always be withheld – I accepted that he trusted me no more than I wanted to cradle him. He got around to telling me that he was heading north that evening – a personal matter – and possibly wouldn't get to check back in with me until the following afternoon. I was gripped by a sudden surge of concern, wondering if this would hinder any tracing or tracking. Quickly enough, I realised that I didn't know where his base camp was – he could have been anywhere, using whores to do all of his watching and running around. However, he mentioned that he'd be 'back in the vicinity then', so panic over. We arranged that he'd spend his travelling time working on massaging the particulars of the background. When we next spoke, I'd be enlightened completely. In between, I was to continue my good work on the structure, and I'd also be coming into a little something else to whet my appetite. No finger pointed towards the PO Box, just sit tight. He was ashamed to say that it was a rush job – circumstances beyond control – so I'd just have to forgive the crudeness. Smugly generous, I did so.

When he'd gone, I found myself itchily frustrated, sitting at the kitchen table, poring over the notes I'd taken from Colin, and the few words and doodles I'd taken from Caller John. I didn't want the momentum to end. I was on edge. When the letterbox snapped open and shut, I flung myself off the chair and out into the hall. The post had already been: through the bedroom window, I'd seen the postman passing our gate while I was on to Colin. I ignored the brown envelope on the ground and wrenched the door open. Woman, short blonde hair, blue and black clothes, hurrying out the gate. I ran, clamped my hand on her upper

arm, and swung her around. I expected Lynskey 2.0, but it was not. Free arm already raised and a yell in her throat, her sunken eyes drilled into mine, wide with panic. Her mouth was thin and wet. She may well have been a looker, were it not for the garb and the decoration of her profession.

'Let go of me,' she hissed, jerking her entire arm viciously. I took her to be somewhere in her thirties. There wasn't a pick on the bone in my grip.

'No chance. Who is he?'

She scowled more fully, darkly, and spasmed again.

'Get off me or I start screaming. Now!'

I couldn't have cared less about the attention. I was suddenly more concerned about my open injured arm. She must have noticed my glance, for she drew back and landed her fist sharply about halfway up the cast. I shouted in pain, and she pulled herself free. As I stooped to nurse the tense throb pulsing into my fingers, she punched me cleanly across the ear. I felt my jaw rattle, and the point of contact began to sing as loudly as any of the birds. She was speaking through her teeth again, though I could barely hear her.

'That freak pays me to deliver notes – not this. Touch me again and you're a dead man.'

It was one of those occasions when the right retort comes long after the intended recipient has departed: if I were to slip her a twenty note, would touching be OK?

She turned on her heels, and started walking quickly away. I could do no more than watch the shapely calves and the sway of her denim skirt ass. She half-ran towards the alley to the left, to where she could disappear into the confusion of the larger estates. I was in too much pain to follow. I shuffled back towards the porch and whatever it was she'd dropped off. Hoping that neither of my nieces inside had been watching the show in their front garden.

I took the envelope from where it lay on the floor, guzzled down two Diazepam, and sat back down at the kitchen table. The persistent throb in my arm was a variation on any of the others I'd felt since it was introduced to the iron bar. I wondered if the bitch could have done any extra damage through the cast. I took the pen from its paperweight duty on my notes and began scribbling the words to describe her. I found them

to be close enough to the cartoon photo fit that Chloe had provided. Same woman. It made sense – two deliveries, the same. She'd used the plural – *pays*. Maybe Colin had a database of Carlow's patrons of the game, a who's who of your basic prostitution. Maybe he'd have mug shots I could look at, identify my assailant, work backwards from her to find him? For that, I'd take ten damn raps to the arm.

When I got around to opening the now-defaced envelope, I was distracted by the thought of having her go down with him. Lynskey too. Inside was a single folded sheet of paper. There were what looked to be like technical schematics in the margins, and a sizeable body of text in some font I didn't recognise. There was no heading, no signature, nothing explaining what it may have been. I read through it once, then a second time, but it took a third and then a fourth before the bells began clanging.

'Alone in the woods, she pauses to bend and drop her fingers into the brook. The cool bubbles send chills throughout her body, forcing a blanket of goose pimples to attach itself to her skin. She sees his face in the watery silt; having lost him first to love and life, she has now lost him to death. The orderly chaotic routine of the stream is fractured by the first tear, a thick salty drop that falls from her doe eye as she blinks. The princess looks inwardly at the new sore space in her tired heart, unaware that she is being watched around the corner of a smiling oak tree.

Though he cannot speak to her, he sends his words on a whistling breeze. She looks up from the teeming waters, startled by the intrusion, and then by the intruder. She gathers herself in steed to pull her thin frame from the ground, intending to run, but is restrained firmly by the arm that shoots out from behind the tree; through time, distance and the silent air between them. She sinks slowly back onto the turf, instantly recognizing the futility of running at all. Her head spins in a whirlwind of memories and unfriendly colours. Hypnotized by fear and a blinding white apprehension, she brings her hands to her mouth, drenching her fingers in the latest flow of sadness.

She is dragged roughly through a chronicle of pain, through a season never forgotten but scabbed as a wound and covered in cloth. She sobs loudly in the summer light, crying to drown out the miserable thoughts. He implores her to acknowledge where the reflections lie, and how safe they are in there. Behind a wall of tears, she will not bear to think of her sores aired elsewhere, as he numbly suggests. Spoken and read by

thousands as they browse the misunderstood life of the girl lying dead and forgotten. Heavy-handed fools lazily scrawling the sad eulogy of a broken soul they never even knew existed.

Moments pass before she realizes that she is on her own once more. She cringes while waiting for him to start whispering again, but the only noise is coming from the stream. He has left a flag, a pointer; a body of thought from their past, a stark image for her to play with. In itself, it is as ghoulish and as terrible now as it was when used as a hanging threat to her childhood. Four dark grins swing murderously, gripping her throat as a work of art, taunting her with the challenge.

She idly cups a handful of water, and lets it slip back through her fingers. Drained by all that has just passed before her, she lowers her head weakly. She is in no position to understand what she has been exposed to, knows only of the past, the present, and a future promised; an apparition from the blackest time of her life, a still from the tallest of bad dreams, and an opportunity to please him again. She is painfully seized by the wide and breathless possibility, and left to her shivering devices.'

I had asked how he managed to have people do the things he has them do; this, this twisted prose with an unspeakable lure, at the very least, was part of it.

* * * * *

Colin called again after lunch, interrupting a video showing of Chloe's silver medal performance at a recent Irish dancing Fheis, something I was ashamedly unable to concentrate on. As much so as it ever was for Colin, he sounded excited. There had been a breakthrough.

'We've done a bit of work on the other cats' background. You remember Lyskey's upbringing?'

'Adopted?'

'All four of our criminals were adopted,' triumphantly. I searched momentarily for the relevance.

'Does that mean something?'

'Maybe not on its own, but there's more. Thanks to a cousin in the Board, we can go a little deeper. All three boys spent their orphan years in the same boys' home in Mayo.'

Hello relevance, my old friend.

'Jesus.'

'I'll take long odds on coincidence.'

I felt dizzy, not sure that I was taking everything in. And still my mouth moved.

'And Lynskey?'

'You ask before I can answer. Here is the *really* interesting part. She spent some time in a girls' home in Sligo. It was destroyed in a fire during the Fifties, with only a handful of survivors. Now, guess where they were shipped off to?'

I actually felt my lower lip dropping.

'You are kidding me.'

'No I'm not. For anything up to twelve months, Lynskey and our three boys shared the same home.'

And that was it. Fireworks, great explosions of colour, flash bombs behind my eyes and in the thud of pain in my arm.

'There is his connection.'

'What's that?'

'There's his connection. He said that these four attacks were connected in some way. This has got to be it.'

He half-whistled, half-exhaled.

'Certainly would seem to be.'

'Christ, this is big.'

'It's the beginning of big.'

'What's next? Do you have records or anything for this home?'

'Sure do. Craggach Ni Riain. I believe that part of it is a guesthouse now.'

'Can you get lists of the people there? The other children?'

'I'm ahead of you, Tom. It's my job to be.'

'Sure. And what's being done with it?'

'We've a few avenues that could be explored. Just waiting on a few things.'

'Is there any chance I could get a look at the lists?'

'What for?'

I swallowed hard, pulse racing.

'It would be useful to have. He's going to give me some more on his background. He might let something or some names slip. It'd be useful to have these names in front of me. What do you think?'

He seemed to pause to consider my breathless application.

'I don't want you calling anyone or doing anything of your own, Tom. It's too risky.'

'I won't do a thing. You have my word on that, Colin. I'm not stupid.'

'Well, I'll see what I can do. No promises. We're treading lightly for now.'

I told him about the call that morning, and how Caller John was out of town. He didn't seem unduly bothered. I then told him about the delivery girl and the subsequent assault. He wasn't impressed with my reaction but seemed mildly concerned for my injury. He then became interested in the note, and my loose suggestion that perhaps there was some undercurrent of mind control to the whole episode. We arranged that he would call to the house to collect, and I quickly made plans to borrow the scanner from Mark's office for the purpose of retaining my own copy. The description of the woman meant nothing to him and his knowledge of Carlow's limited vice trade, but as he so succinctly put it, 'the hire price can always include petrol or a bus fare.'

* * * * *

I guess I shouldn't have ignored the fact that the Diazepam pills had been given to me for whenever I may have had trouble sleeping. Once Colin had signed off, I'd migrated back to my room and given in to the temptation to rest my eyes and limbs for a while. Hours later, I was woken by Chloe, calling me to the tea table. The slumber fell from me like a wet coat from a woman, almost as though it was hurrying to have me awake and all-consumed by the dream. It was one of those insanely realistic visions, daubed with enough detail and weight to suggest some kind of hidden meaning. It began with my old early morning commute to Balham and then into the city on the tube. I say tube, but the graffiti-decked train actually sets out in open-air, only going underground at the river. My carriage was next to empty, so it was a day I definitely shouldn't have been on that route. A Sunday, a public holiday, maybe even a royal occasion. Whatever the reason, I shared my car only with an old soul not interested in me or my business. At Stockwell, I watched a woman waiting on the platform as we slowed down. She got on at the door nearest me,

and seemed to pause to look around. She struck me to be a student, in her early twenties. Small, blessed with soft skin, a natural pout and a head of unruly brown curls fastened somewhere at the back of her head. She wore a hiking jacket, thin blue canvas trousers and a backpack. She caught my eye and strode down the centre aisle as the doors breathed shut behind her. With upwards of fifty empty seats in range, she slid in to sit next to me, without a word. My immediate reaction was one of *discomfort*. When I woke, I could still feel the rash of where her thigh had been pressed against mine. Her scent began to overpower me, wooden earthy spices, more and more with each new breath. With every shuffle of her legs, I could feel her, *alive*, through the flesh connection she'd established. When we reached the tunnels, she moved with the stealth of an animal, deftly dropping the fly of my suit pants and leaning quickly across me. I was frozen in shock, unable to move or speak. She worked me with her mouth for an eternal minute before I felt us slowing, pulling into an approach on the next station. I saw Heather's face reflected in the black glass opposite me, her spectral eyes fixed coldly on the movement in my lap. Horrified, I pulled the stranger up by the shoulders, all gleaming lips and narrowing eyelids. Struggling to put myself away, I couldn't avoid the unflinching expression and the filthy suggestion it formed. *The damage is done – you've brought all this upon yourself.*

I really don't dream that often, and when I do, I tend to search high and low for a meaning. Of course I hadn't ever been unfaithful to Heather – she'd taken care of that particular chore in our home. But I couldn't help wondering if it wasn't meant to be as simple as that, if I was the catalyst for some other reason? What if it wasn't Heather at all? What if it was some kind of metaphor for something else? My involvement in Milford, and the dances that followed, for instance? Lately, I'd certainly known exposure to women comfortable with the lewd and the sexual. Groggy and disoriented as I lumbered towards the knocking door, I decided that I wasn't able for the mind games at that time. Greeting Chloe with a yawn, I filed it away under bad dream.

After eating, Mark asked if I wanted to head down to Stonehaven for a couple of pints and whatever match was on the box. Given that I'd no good reason to decline, and I could always have the mobile with me just in case, I went for it. The evening was perfectly cool,

so we walked, promising ourselves a taxi if either objected to walking home. As it happens, we didn't much bother with the game – France battering seven shades out of some unfortunates – instead sticking to the steady flow from the bar, and the conversation. He spoke at length of the girls, and of the stale air in his small office with its smaller-minded staff. As could have been expected, I was grilled again about Milford, and just how accidental my role in the kidnap recovery had *really* been. I would have liked to have said something about where I was at that time, but I wasn't sure that I could avoid saying anything about Chloe, so I bit my lip and feigned wide eyes at it all. Besides, I had every hope that it was all nearing its payout end. There were people working away on the case, even while I was ordering in a fifth round in an old stone pub with my brother.

Close to eleven, we were piling out of a taxi outside home, reeking of onions from Castle Hill burgers. The house was dark, save for a single light in the kitchen which guided me to the sealed blue folder on the table. The note that Janet had attached for me confirmed that Colin O'Toole had dropped it off earlier that evening. While Mark relieved himself, I smuggled the delivery to my room, not wanting the questions. I could have something fresh for Janet in the morning.

I took an eager look at the contents of Colin's folder in bed, and quickly wished that I hadn't. My bleary eyes lost themselves in the endless list of names and numbers, mixing surnames with first names and bringing on the kind of sick dizziness that only drunken concentration knows. Admitting defeat, I snapped the cardboard pocket shut, and tossed it in the general direction of my stockpile on the floor. Turning into the pillows, I warned myself that I would not be entertaining any dream-metaphors that night, however arousing they may be.

The new day broke with the usual sore suggestion that for some time now, I'd been getting a little too old for this hangover lark. I could do little more than agree as I tossed and turned in the fumes of a wino's sleep. I soaked myself in coffee before daring to look at Colin's list again. Janet was milling about the kitchen, and seemed to accept me telling her that the papers had to do with me and Milford. It wasn't even a lie at all.

With a slightly clearer head than last time, it was easier looking at the lists. I remembered the specifics of what I was finger-reading. I found Lynskey and the three others, and felt another huge rush at just being involved. There were codes of some kind beside each name, but no legend to suggest what they meant. I figured that Colin had copied and pasted from a master document – perhaps there were additional things that I wasn't meant to see. I spent seconds on each name, not quite sure what I was looking for. There was a boy sharing his name with a famous Cork hurler, and another who could have been Lynskey's brother had I not known that she was an only child. The one other name triggering any kind of button seemed familiar, but I didn't know why. James Farrell. I puzzled over him for a while, put a marker in his margin and moved on. I reached the end of the list, found nothing else of immediate interest, and still couldn't place James Farrell anywhere or at any time. But it felt recent. With mouth parched, I headed back to the kitchen for something wet. Janet was rolling pastry. She laughed as she looked up.

'There's the face of concentration if ever I saw it.'

I laughed myself as I reached the fridge.

'Brain not working this morning.'

'Very few male brains do. Anything I can help with?'

'Not really, thanks. I'm just trying to place a name. Ever get that?'

'All the time. And it'll eat at you until you get it. What's the name?'

'Farrell. James Farrell.'

The rolling pin stopped, and her brow creased.

'As in the doctor?'

With a mouthful of grapefruit juice and a frazzled mind, I was always going to be slow.

'Mmm?'

'The doctor. Up Bennekerry way.'

Inside, I could hear a click, the kind you hear when the knocking metal balls of the familiar office toy come together.

'That's it! The folks were talking about him. You're a genius, Janet!'

She smiled, fully.

'You can thank all of womankind.'

I wasn't listening. I was moving at a frightening speed. We had a James Farrell present; now, what about anything approaching *correct*?

'Tell me – is he a young man, or older?'

Again, the pin stopped.

'Old enough. Fifties, maybe. We've only been to him whenever Layton is away.'

'Brilliant. I don't suppose you know where he came from?'

A very long shot.

'No, like I say, he's not our regular.'

'Grand. And thanks again.'

She looked bemused as I shot out the door, the latest in a long line of excited palpitations matching my stride. I wasn't bothered by how I seemed to her. I was suspended in the whirl of the possibility, and the spin of where it could take me. Right name and age equals a start. Colin could do the rest, if he hadn't done so already. Another phone call to make.

Home.16

By the sound of things, I was either pulling him away from something at the station, or keeping him from it in the first place. It did nothing to sway my energy.

'I have something, not sure if it qualifies as a lead or not.'

'Go ahead.'

Unenthusiastic. *Here's the rope to hang yourself – I told you to leave well enough alone.* Strangely, I was too aroused by the possibility to worry about annoying him.

'There's a name on the list. James Farrell. There's a doctor by that name up the hill. He's in or about the right age to have been in the home.'

'And?'

'And is it not worth checking out?'

'There's a lot of Farrell's in the area, Tom. Probably a lot of Jims too.'

'But the same age?'

I could tell he was distracted. Something else he was keeping from me?

'Yeah, maybe not. He's not our man though.'

'How do you know?'

'He looked after the mother after she had her turn. When were you last talking to him?'

'Yesterday morning, right after I was talking to you.'

He breathed out deeply.

'Wasn't him, then. I called you from the mother's. He was there with us for a good half hour after that.'

I felt my heart sink. How easily links were made and broken.

'Is there not something you can do, some kind of background check? A quick one?'

If it were Sipowitz or even Magnum I was addressing, I'd know exactly what to ask for, and it wouldn't sound so awkward. He sighed.

'Sure. I can get someone to look into it, satisfy your curiosity. Can't say I hold a lot of hope for it though.'

'Fair enough.'

'I'll give you a shout back in a while. You be around?'

'Yeah.'

In the time that passed, I wondered worriedly why he had been so quick to suck the air from my sails. Had he somehow learned of my earlier indiscrete visit to Lynskey? Was there some new, unhealthy development that my ears weren't yet ready to hear? I ran a thousand bad scenarios past my eyes before the house phone screamed to interrupt.

'Turns out there might be something on your boy, Tom. The doctor on the hill has adopted parents.'

Momentarily stunned, I could slowly feel the vindication of my suggestion eking through all else. *Adopted could mean home.*

'Christ. Any mention of the same home?'

'We haven't that much yet. No guarantee, but we do have him in Galway town from the late fifties onwards.'

'Is that enough to go on?'

He paused, sounding tired.

'Maybe. Would be no harm to have a word, but we have to keep to the slow road. That's the word from on high.'

'So you're not doing anything?'

'We're doing plenty. Just in our own way. The right way.'

At seeing the value of my lead disappear, anger began to bubble in me.

'And what about this guy? What if he's caught up in it? What if he can tell us something?'

'Highly doubtful, but what if he *is* involved, what if we send him running? We can't risk this yet on what could be a coincidence.'

'Why not go cautiously? Don't mention the kidnappings. See if he can give you *anything*.'

He sighed again.

'I can't go. I'm a known face, remember? Guards don't do social visits.'

It seemed desperate that I had to be the one making the suggestions.

'Jesus, then I'll go.'

'No way.'

'Oh, come on. If no-one else will, why not?'

I was within inches of spilling the beans on the Lynskey interview. *I can do this.*

'Because you're not qualified. No risks, remember?'

'I'm a journalist, for Christ's sake. Asking questions is my business. And I'm not stupid enough to take risks.'

'I don't mean to suggest that you are.'

Another weakened silence.

'Can't you send someone else?'

'I don't have anyone else, Tom. There's a world of departmental politics to wade through.'

'Jesus, you're not going to let this go on *politics*, are you?'

'Not a whole lot I can do.'

'Send me, for God's sake! Tell me what to say, who to be, it doesn't matter. Just don't waste this guy.'

I really didn't want to see the name I'd spotted ignored, especially now with the incumbent links. Of course it could have been a huge coincidence. But if it wasn't, maybe he could lead us a little closer to Caller John. I was astounded that Colin of all people was willing to let this one pass. Jesus, he could still *be* Caller John, even with the loose phone alibi.

'I can't let you go, Tom. It's just not worth the chance.'

'Rubbish. There's no chance involved. Tell me how to be and I can follow it to the letter.'

The deep sigh that followed suggested that maybe he was caving. At least that's what I was hoping.

'Look, I don't have to mention Lynskey or the phone calls. Any basic search on the records of these homes will throw up the names, right?'

'Sure, with permission.'

'Right. I can go to him with some crap about researching poorhouses, homes and the like. See if he offers anything. See if he's nervous.'

It seemed like a winning notion.

'What good will that do?'

'Jesus, at least if we can place him in the same home at the same time, we'll know that it's worth your while talking to him whenever you bother to move on this.'

'Don't get lippy, Tom. This is out of your depth.'

He hadn't earned the right to be cool, I thought.

'Sorry, I'm just frustrated.'

'Yeah. Tell you what, Tom. The best I can promise is that I'll have someone out to him within a few days. I can't do anything else for now. Hands are either tied or busy on something else.'

'And that's it?'

'That's it. And I don't want you taking on anything yourself, do you hear me?'

'I hear you.'

'Well, heed me. This is no time to be playing the superhero. I'll check in with you later.'

And he was gone, leaving me to hum my thunderous disgust at his loyalty to *politics*. Had I really driven him that far from me by holding Caller John to myself for a few miserable days?

With the throb of the dead tone in my ears, I was already working on a blueprint to ignore him, *blindly*.

A quick call to Farrell's home surgery number, and I learned that his appointments ran through to six that day. After a long afternoon of valiantly and genuinely trying to depress my intentions, I stuffed the notepad and the silent mobile phone into a backpack and left. Before getting into the car, I gingerly removed my bad arm from the sling and slid it down into the arm of a light jacket; given the minor celebrity status of my injuries following local news exposure, I couldn't risk giving myself away that easily. During the slow, careful trip up the winding roads of Brownshill, I allowed the guilt and the apprehension to drip through my veins, knowing that it couldn't compare to sitting back and allowing regional ignorance get in the way. Any false moves and I'd be landing myself in a world of trouble. I planned to counter that by being as cautious as I could. I wasn't sure how or even if I could take any new findings to Colin, but I'd cross that particular bridge if I came to it. Damn, I could work it somewhere into Caller John's dialogue, if I wanted

to. The drive was all the more tiring for my arm, but I couldn't dare asking for a lift, so I had to manage.

I cruised along the lanes of the pleasant hilltop community for a few minutes before spotting the white surgery sign. Had to be it. Excitement surged once more through me – seeing the faceless door to which I would be calling made it that small bit closer to real. I pulled up a little beyond the gate and checked the clock on the dashboard. Appointments over, and some time to spare for tea. The house was white and impressive, drenched in early evening orange. I assumed that one of the comfortable outbuildings acted as his surgery. The intercom-controlled gate was open, a hint that perhaps the necessary urban paranoia hadn't yet crept out this far. My father used to speak of days when not a single door in Carlow would be closed. Even I could remember running freely from one house to another as a boy, able to take the ball from Ollie Tynan's or Stephen Phelan's room without mothers even looking up from the chores. The brief nod to old times reminded me of my parents, but the pang I felt at having seen them only twice since returning home lasted but seconds. Nothing I could do right now.

I could feel myself shaking as I neared the porch, knowing that there was no going back. Here I was, going against a direct if loose order from the law, but that order was one of an idiot as far as I was concerned. He hadn't been in Milford. He hadn't spoken to Caller John. I'd done both. I felt more than qualified to make this judgement.

The doorbell jangled spaciously away down the main hallway. It was answered by a sullen-faced tanned girl, foreign. She looked to be in her early twenties, possibly French.

'Yes?'

'Hello. I was wondering if I could speak to Doctor Farrell, please.'

I flashed a smile, hoping that it didn't wobble as much as the rest of me. My nerves felt as if the tip of each had been sliced clean off. Would I be coming face to face with my tormentor? Was this where it all ended?

'I'm sorry, the surgery is closed.'

In fact, she didn't appear too bothered.

'Oh, my apologies, this is a personal matter.'

She frowned.

'Who can I say you are?'

'My name is Stephens. Gerald Stephens.'

On the few occasions when I'd been forced to falsify my name, they've generally been lousy. This was better than most. And she was not a happy foreign camper.

'One minute please.'

As the door closed back over, I exhaled deeply, feeling the cool breeze sniffing around the damp patches underarm. My heart was still thudding, working off all corners of its chamber. There is no need, I tried to insist, reminding myself that I'd been practicing the character even since leaving Brooklawns. And then the frosted glass was filled by bulk, a frame larger and wider than the slim doorgirl, and the curtain went up.

'Mr. Stephens, how can I help you?'

Truth be known, he was not easy on the eye. When he spoke, it was as though he was being paid by the smack of his jowls. His features appeared to have been pressed into the fat on his face as an afterthought. I couldn't believe that he was a doctor, this glaring poster child for weight problems. Then again, maybe it was glandular. More sudden shame in my cheeks.

'I certainly hope so. My name is Gerald Stephens, and I am a writer of sorts.'

I reached out to shake hands, and found him softer and colder than I would have expected. His pained appearance didn't change.

'Of sorts?'

'I'm always a little uneasy using the title. I think it sounds pretentious,' I smiled.

'If it's what you do, it's what you do. Is there something I can help with? I don't mean to be rude, but I do have an engagement this evening.'

He had no interest in the nothings, then.

'Perhaps, but I won't keep you long. Let me explain. I'm researching for a sizeable tome I'm producing for an American imprint on the legacy of poorhouses in Ireland. Particularly from the Famine years onwards.'

'I see.'

The first sinking feeling made itself known. No recognition. Had I the wrong man? Was that why he was being so brisk?

'Well, I'll also be covering children's homes, industrial schools, anything along those lines of hardship.'

'Hardship.'

Had I not been watching the mesmerising rise and fall of his chin, I may have seen the storm gathering in his eyes, and the drop of a furrowed brow to sad despair.

'Yes, it's been commissioned from the angle of survival.'

'I see. Are you soliciting funds, or...or...'

He trailed off, suddenly weak with the effort of trying to fight the inevitable. I knew instantly that this man was no more than a fringe player, but maybe one with stories to tell. I felt the way I've always thought a hunter may feel when prey begins to tire. *Ready.*

'No, no, nothing like that. I hope you can forgive the intrusion, but I believe that you spent some time in a home?'

His face hardened, and his shoulders shook violently.

'Who told you that?'

It was more incredulous than accusatory. Sinking feeling number two. They came and went like hiccups.

'I have access to a central database, we cross-reference as we go along. I did call earlier today, but couldn't get through. Again, I apologise if this is an inconvenience.'

'And why do you need to speak to me?'

No denial, I shot to myself.

'I don't *need* to speak to you as such. We're just taking a random subset, across all social brackets. As a doctor, I assume you've done well for yourself, which would make for an interesting sidebar. Americans love the overcoming of adversity.'

'I'm not sure that I appreciate being a sidebar,' he stammered. Had he been physically able, I'm sure he would have attempted a smile for my benefit. Instead, he remained a nervous, sweating wreck in his own front porch. I was astounded by his reaction to me, but I didn't show it. There was no room beside the clamouring, excited suggestions in my ears.

'Of course. Stupid term. Do I take it that I have the right James Farrell?'

I breezed the vital question, as though nothing depended on it. Already, I was mentally dialling a line to Colin. His face fell to the worn rust-coloured welcome mat at his feet.

‘Yes, that’s me. You have me alright.’

I felt my entire body jolt, and I hoped that the electric shock had been retained internally. I couldn’t blow this one. I had to behave, to pretend that I was someone else.

‘Well, would you be interested in speaking to me about the book? We can be as discreet as you wish, of course.’

His expression appeared to quickly bundle itself into something approaching strength. I already knew the answer. I’d given him his window out.

‘No, I’m afraid I wouldn’t. I’m sorry if I’ve wasted your time.’

The only thing he was sorry about was ever opening the door to me, I figured. He began to shift his weight towards the door, moving to end our short meeting. There was no way he was tempering my momentum that easily.

‘No need to apologise at all, Mr. Farrell. And if I have upset you in any way, I am truly sorry.’

‘You haven’t. It’s just a part of me I’m not fond of remembering.’

‘I think I understand. And I can see how it affects you, no offence intended.’

As if it vilified his discomfort, he pushed a hand to his forehead and scooped the sweat back over the thin strands of hair at the top of his head. Somehow, I still felt no pity. I was way too near to the kill, the scent heavy and pungent on the light savannah wind.

‘Just one final question before I leave you in peace, if you don’t mind? It doesn’t directly concern you, I should add.’

His eyes froze, and the rest of him followed.

‘What’s the question?’

‘Well, as I say, I’ve been doing some research, some background. If I’m placing you in the correct home, it would appear that it spawned some interesting characters.’

As I spoke, he clouded, and he swallowed great mouthfuls of air as though his life depended on it. He may well have tried to utter something, but it would have been lost on me, mid-roll.

'I have three serious crimes on record, attributed to past residents. I don't know if...'

Three instead of four, because I knew that Lynskey's name had not yet been released in connection with anything.

He interrupted with a guttural rumble, darkened by the excess saliva and the fear from the pit of his stomach.

'Did *she* send you?'

Eyes bore into mine, almost red with panic.

'She?'

I thought quickly as he stared unblinkingly at me. It was a risk, but one worth taking. He didn't respond.

'By she do you mean Emma Lynskey?'

He nodded, white buttons of spittle hopping to the corners of his mouth. I feigned my best puzzled look.

'No, no-one has sent me. Like I say, I'm with the book.'

I tried to behave as though he was acting perfectly normal, and not descending into foam before me. Something told me I might get more that way, more than if I was to act on the bells beginning to clang in my ears.

'Why would that woman have sent me?'

The desperate growl came again: 'Because I sent her away.'

That I *hadn't* seen coming. The dying animal was kicking up a new dust storm. I almost allowed Tom Lacey out through the disguise.

'Hold on a minute – Lynskey was here? When?'

'Recently.'

'Isn't she wanted by the police? Did you report this?'

'No, and don't. She's gone.'

'Where?'

'How would I know?'

I believed the wreck. I couldn't believe that I was so near. I couldn't believe that Colin had planned to leave this guy alone.

'You say that you sent her away? Why? Because of the kidnappings?'

'Mr. Stephens, I am finished with you. Goodbye.'

'No, hold on, just this once. Why did you send her away?'

'If you don't leave I'm calling the Guards.'

A viable threat to us both: one possibly aiding and abetting a fugitive, the other disobeying police orders and *interviewing* the aider.

'Please, did you send her away because of him?'

By now, his back was to me as he greasily worked the handle of the door. He stopped, spoke without tone and without facing me.

'How do you know about him?'

I just about kept myself from screaming with joy. It didn't matter that I was smiling; he couldn't see me. I filtered it from my voice.

'Research.'

'Research.'

He breathed heavily and shakily and pushed in the door. I wouldn't see his face again that evening.

'She said that The Chipler was playing again. That's all I know. Now get off my property or I will have you removed.'

The door slammed thickly, sending a waft of cold, post-cooking air towards the cavern of my wide, paralysed mouth. The old buffalo was dead. Goodbye Caller John, and hello *Chipler*.

* * * * *

I didn't bother looking back at the white gables of the doctor's large house as I walked quickly towards the car. I could feel eyes on my back, *knew* that he had ducked into one of the front rooms, his shaking mould watching from behind the lace curtains. Just in case I was planning to stick around or try something else. There was no way for him to know, but he'd given me more than I could have ever hoped for from him. Placement in the home, a whiff of Lynskey's recent whereabouts, and a *name* for the man who seemed to yanking all of our strings. I saluted a youngish farmer who wheeled by in a brand new John Deere, tipping his

hat to me like a pro. Him passed, I got back into the car, and rained my good fist down on the steering wheel in elation.

The adolescent in me wanted to pull in bare seconds down the road, to bring my findings to Colin, my refusal to crow being enough self-satisfaction in itself. But I knew that even with the information I had to offer, my disobedience would wave all kinds of red flags before his eyes. Maybe even open up the subject of other secret interviews. I needed to be careful. I needed to be calmer when boasting of the fruits of my indiscretions. I couldn't think of anything so urgent and so pressing that it couldn't wait until morning. James Farrell didn't strike me as a man to run, or even a man to run very far without being noticed. Maybe Colin would have his own guy out to him by then. Maybe I could work what I now knew into the latest conversation with our telephone friend. Damn, I could even make up a conversation for the purpose of passing on the details – how would Colin know any different? Whatever happened, I wasn't doing anything with these crippling ripples of nervous energy in my bones.

Back in the quiet importance of my room, I took the notepad from my backpack, intending to add to my collection of notes. I remembered the phone, and placed it back on its perch on the locker. I glanced instinctively at the screen, pressed on the power button, and froze. Nothing. Dead battery.

Panic gripped me, tearing away the boards of my evening's achievement like a bear pulling apart an old wooden hut. The phone bounced around in my palms as I rushed to connect the charger. I couldn't believe that I had been so stupid. One awful minute later, the display blinked free from sleep, showed me my network, and told me that I had one message received.

I could feel my ears burning, and the loom of tension somewhere deeper inside both. No-one else had this number, and it was a little too soon for unsolicited direct marketing. I'd missed his call. All of the power and the footing I'd earned for myself in this crazy week – it had flown from me before we'd had time to become properly acquainted.

Now, I could even be jeopardising the whole ruse, just by having neglected a damn phone battery.

I moved into my messages with an eerie speed, grateful at least that I'd had the automatic sense to set up the book when the phone had been first ready to use. I listened to the playback of the call's origin, suddenly unable to remember the number he'd given me all those days ago. And then the message began, cheerful but deathly serious.

'Tom, I believe we're having a little phone problem. I'll be trying again in an hour's time. Here's hoping you have the courtesy to have your phone on then.'

I was numb at its sharp end, choked once more by the hypnotic drone and frozen by a growing fear. I needed to keep him sweet while things happened around us. This did not qualify as sweet. I checked the bedside clock – forty minutes since the time of his short message. I settled down on the bed and waited, checking nervously and needlessly that the handset was switched on. My hands still shook, rejecting all else that I'd learned that evening. It was the first time yet I'd actually wanted him to call. I'd never known a day to rollercoaster so violently, and she hurtled into a sickening trough when the beep of my bastard phone began.

'Tom. Good of you to answer. Have you an adequate excuse for this evening's faux pas, or shall we put it down to force of habit?'

Again, serious but semi-cheerful. My racing pulse slowed to a relaxed gallop, recognising the first strains of relief. I wouldn't have thought to use the habit excuse myself, but it was a perfect presentation. And quite probably the truth too.

'My apologies. It must have died. I certainly didn't do it intentionally, and it won't happen again.'

'It certainly won't. Now, how productive has our day been?'

Three images flashed suddenly before my eyes – Janet, rolling pin in hand, identifying our doctor friend; the white pebbled home in the hills with its external surgery; the hunched shoulders of James Farrell as he turned away from me. Excitement crawled through the threads of my nerves once more. Rollercoaster climb.

'Reasonably so. Ready to learn more.'

'Excellent, excellent. I plan to give you as thorough a backgrounder as possible. I assume you took collection of the document?'

'I did.'

'Again, please excuse that it is only a draft copy, and not the actual item sent. Do you have your notes to hand?'

I eased off the bed and muttered a long-winded response as I retrieved them from the laptop case.

'Ready to go?'

'Ready.'

'Right. Let me get as near to the beginning as I can. I began my shift on this earth with little of the comforts or trappings you and I now take for granted. Subsequent research has led me to learn that I was abandoned as an infant, left at the desk of a small Post Office near Westport. Not quite the baby in the rushes, but an interesting tale to learn of one's self, all the same.'

'I can imagine.'

I hoped that my hushed tones masked the whirrs and clicks of the cogs in my brain. Another orphan. The West. I *knew* where he was going.

'Anyway, as was the fashion at the time, I was sent to a children's home on the coast, given over to the Brothers for the duration. I spent the bones of fifteen years under their roof before acquiring the means to wave a fond farewell.'

I was scribbling furtively, wondering if the faint scratch of pen on paper was sufficient, or if I needed to fill his silence with sounds.

'It should come as no great surprise to learn that my years in that particular place have had great bearing on the life that followed.'

'Let me guess: revenge?'

'Revenge?'

'Sure. It's certainly the more obvious route. Children in home, Brothers, trauma – pick any newspaper up from the past ten years and you'll find some mention.'

'Of course, of course. Well, I can't say that I wasn't exposed to the crueller sides of some of our *Christian* brethren. I have been bugged so hard that I passed red stools for a week. But that has no more than a

minimal leaning on who I am. Although I'm sure the psychoanalysts may say different.'

He drifted off in his own thoughts. I was churning with the image he'd nailed to my mind. The pause needed my input.

'You say minimal?'

'Of course. I have never been about revenge. It's such a naked and vulnerable motive. Besides, the main champion of my suffering died before I could ever have gotten to him. No, the initial influence would have been the things I learned about pain, and the ease with which we speak to it. Pain can be incredibly frail on its own. Though I will interrupt there to assure you that I am recording to tape as we speak, as they say. I want you to get all of this.'

'Of course you do.'

It sounded more sarcastic than I should have dared. Thankfully, his head of steam was too strong to notice.

'And though it may seem like I'm skirting and moving from one topic to another, we will be revisiting all of this in greater detail. Documentation to come.'

I cleared my throat in acknowledgement.

'So, as I say, becoming a bedfellow of pain's was integral to my growth. And as, I suppose, a consequence, discovering the reaction of others to pain and discomfort. That led me to suggesting that I perhaps could use these inferior standards to my own means.'

'By inferior you mean human?'

It was a genuine question, though delivered with more than a trace of disgust. It certainly tickled his fancy, and the boom of his laugh reverberated through to my middle ear.

'You're a regular Oscar Wilde, Tom. A new national treasure. Although to which museum will you retire, Dublin or London?'

No slouch on the humour yourself, you overspoken creep, I almost jotted on my pad. I chose to ignore the flaunt of how much he knew about me.

'Yes, I suppose you could say "human". Regardless, it came to my attention that this was the easiest way to exert a control over others. To play on their fears, their nightmares, to drop them into situations and places where they wouldn't ordinarily go. They say that a child can lift the chassis of a car from a trapped parent's torso. Such feats of the superhuman are instinctive and require no thought. My undertakings are

the absolute opposite. Subhuman, even. I forced people into dangerous and terrifying places by promising an even worse fate lest they disobey.'

'Hold on a minute – what age was this?'

He smacked his lips.

'I would have been ten.'

'Jesus Christ – you were *ten* years of age?'

'That's right.'

I actually shook my head in disbelief. The control and the mind games came later, I'd been telling myself. Not this.

'What were you doing at that age?'

'Like I say, learning to control people.'

'*People?* Children?'

'Why, yes. Older, younger, the same age, all kinds.'

He seemed baffled by me.

'What were you doing to them?'

I almost didn't want to hear an answer. In a split second, I'd decided that finally this was way too much for me. I needed to hear that Colin and his men were moving. Now.

'Oh, a variety of things. It's all documented. Theft, destruction, animals. The kinds of thing that usually get children into trouble.'

'But why?'

'I've told you before. The sense of power. Of knowing that I am the puppeteer to all these sad wooden toys. Of being able to taste the rush I know they're feeling each time. True power is having someone do something you know they don't want to do. *This* was the breeding ground for my later work.'

Work: Lynskey et al?

'And why were you never stopped?'

'Stopped?'

Scorn had arms wrapped around his laugh.

'Yes, stopped. Punished?'

'How do you stop something you can't see?'

'*What?*'

'They never knew I was the one, Tom. Where's the point in that? Known names are useless.'

'So how did you do this?'

'Anonymously. Instructions in secret notes. I still called all of the shots, but no-one ever knew. Imagine: a school of a hundred children terrorised by a stranger, and he was always amongst them. To this day, nobody knows who I am. Not even this book will change that.'

It was a chilling thought, a new cold between the dazzles and the daze of my hailstone questions. He went on.

'The younger ones would lie about having seen the culprit. Tall, adult, glasses, hat, long black coat. It stuck. Have you ever seen Willy Wonka's sidekick, the one tempting the children?'

The absurdity of the reference threw me completely.

'What?'

'An eerily accurate match for their description. I can't help but wonder if one of them was involved with that film.'

'Right.'

It was all I could offer in baffled response.

'And they were doing soundbytes, even in those days. Some poor soul saw fit to put a name to the nameless me watching them. Being that it wasn't of my origination, I could do little to stop it. But it lasted.'

And the name pushed its head out through the rapid undergrowth of my thoughts, calling out with the wild and playful uncertainty of a cub: it got past my lips without any kind of check.

'Let me guess - The Chipler?'

In the pause that was always going to follow, before fear was able to mould its intent into a bludgeon upon my utter stupidity, I pictured him cocking his head to one side in query, a playful cockatoo suddenly turned murderous. *Who's a very silly boy?* I could barely believe the day's second huge mistake. It was an offering all my own, not even as though he had lured me into it. I waited through those brief few seconds in agony. What had I done now?

'Who have you been speaking to?'

He sounded clear, focused, but without any emotion. It did nothing for my fear.

'No-one. I - I...'

I needed my mind to work more quickly than it had ever before.

'Come now, Tom. You were warned very specifically against moving on your own on this. *Who have you spoken to?*'

More focus. I needed something.
'Nobody. I haven't spoken to anybody. I got the name from an article.'

Too loose.

'What article?'

It was impossible to think clearly.

'One about the church burning.'

'What about it?'

He was following each of my answers without a breath. Already expelling them.

'It made mention of that name. Something about the local kids hearing it.'

'And which paper was this?'

I was floundering, and he knew it.

'I don't know. One of the local rags, can't remember.'

'You're lying to me.'

'What?'

'You're lying to me, Tom. There was no mention in any paper. And do you want to know how I know this? Aside from having every clipping going, I know that no-one who ever *knew* that name would speak of it as loosely as you just have.'

The conviction of his verbal beatdown terrified me. He'd stood back and watched as I dug deeper and deeper. I couldn't answer to that.

'So let me reiterate myself: who have you been speaking to?'

'I - I...'

'Pathetic. It's irrelevant. In the long run it doesn't matter. Let me go back over something, just so as we are crystal clear.'

His voice became stronger, more agitated, but still controlled. I heard something along the lines of a whimper escape my lips. It was followed by the sound of Chloe shouting somewhere in the house, and I fell desperately envious of her innocence.

'Did I not warn you of the consequence of doing anything on your own, of contaminating the facts?'

My limbs shuddered as I answered 'yes' and nodded at the same time.

'And yet still you disobey me?'

'I haven't been speaking to anybody.'

I don't know why I was persisting with the lie. Maybe because *that* seemed to be the particular crime angering him so. He dismissed me with a click of impatience.

'You are an ignorant man, Tom Lacey. To run against a direct order of mine is foolish. To then lie to me, to neglect the fact that I have spent my entire life studying others – it almost defies belief. I *know* you have spoken to somebody. Though irrelevant, I have given you three opportunities to tell me whom. And like Peter himself, you have failed me.'

Who was Peter? The accusations were so firm and so true.

'I'm sorry.'

'Woefully insufficient. Tom, you had every chance to work this properly, to make yourself an exceedingly wealthy man into the bargain. Instead, you have chosen to fuck yourself.'

Home.17

As the line went dead, the braids of the day's error unravelled and wrapped themselves tightly around my lungs. Somewhere beneath my attempts to breath, my heart was convulsing, and there was a sourness rising in the back of my throat. Sickness. The mechanics of a body not working as it is meant to. Just like disobeying a mad man, and then confessing so carelessly I didn't even notice as it was happening.

The noise of the house and the evening neighbourhood continued around me while I waited for my organs to return control. As serious as everything had been so far, this was deadly so. And all I knew for certain was that I'd angered this man beyond any humour of his I'd known. Capable of commanding others to do unspeakable things when calm, only God and he knew what he might do when enraged. There was no debate, no delay, no attempt to face this time alone. I took the mobile from where it had fallen on the bed, and punched in Colin's number from memory. I no longer had to worry about keeping that particular channel free, I figured shakily. And then came the question of how exactly I would explain myself to Colin – do I tell *him* that I have disobeyed him also? How had I managed to compile this catalogue of stupidity? He answered on the first ring, forcing me once more to uncomfortably think as I spoke.

'Tom, what do you have for me?'

'Colin, I'm not sure how it's happened.'

Decision one: I had not been to see James Farrell that day.

'What's happened?'

'I've pissed him off. I mean really pissed him off.'

I could hear shuffling and shifting in the background, and longingly imagined that he was hastily dispatching orders with silent pointings and waves.

'How did you manage to do that?'

Accusing me already. I knew I deserved it. And I knew that I sounded pathetic.

'I don't know. Something about me doing my own research. Going against his wishes.'

'What research?'

Certainly not doctors up Brownshill. It came to me in a flash.

'Going to see a friend of a friend. Last week, before Milford.'

'Why did you go see this friend?'

'She worked on the skulls case. Consultant. You probably know her.'

'Try me.'

'Jane something.'

'Doesn't ring a bell. Why did you go see her?'

'Out of interest. Like I say, she's a friend of a friend who invited me along. She knew I was interested. She's the one who told me about the skulls in the first place.'

The details sounded good as I heard them back. It took a very talented man or woman to tie a lie so convincingly with ribbons of facts. And I knew that Colin's estimation of me had suffered somewhat, so he could easily be duped by the depth of my explanation. Besides, I wasn't exactly lying about the Waterford summit – only its relevance – so that covered most of the assurance.

'Right. And this was before you had any contact with him?'

'Yes.'

'So why is that bothering him?'

In my haste I hadn't worried about the validity.

'I don't know. Something about not being distracted from what he tells me. His facts.'

'So why did you tell him?'

'I didn't mean to. It just came out accidentally.'

A home truth if ever there was one. Colin sighed heavily into the phone.

'So did he threaten you, or what?'

'Not exactly. He just said that I was screwed, and hung up.'

'That's all?'

'That's all he said. I'm nervous here, Colin. All he has to do is click his fingers and he has some lunatic willing to obey. If he thinks that I could go to the Guards with what I know, I'm in trouble.'

'True.'

Too calm for my liking.

'So what can I do?'

'Sit tight. I'll round up a couple of non-uniforms, have them keep an eye on your place, for the time being.'

'Non-uniforms? Plain clothes?'

'Yes. Don't worry, you'll do well to even notice them. I'll give you a bell back on this number when they move. Are you going to say anything to the others?'

'What do you think?'

'Give it until the morning. See if he calls back. No need to worry anyone if not necessary. We'll be watching the place anyway.'

'Am I right to be worried?'

'I would be cautious rather than worried. As far as we know, he tends to go for the more complicated, a bigger plan. Unless he's said otherwise to you?'

'No. He said they were projects.'

Then again, maybe no-one had cocked things up as badly as I had with him.

'There you go. All we can do is keep an eye on things, and we'll work away here with what we have. Anything you can be doing?'

'I can go back over my notes, see if I can find anything. Check out the PO Box again.'

'Good. Give me a shout if you find anything. And be sure and keep an eye out for the women.'

'Sorry?'

'Lynskey and your hooker friend. We'd especially like to speak to the latter.'

'Sure.'

I almost slipped and made mention of where I knew she'd been until very recently.

'Good man.'

He signed off, and triggered a craving deep inside for the blissfully ignorant optimism and faith he was wearing. *You don't know him like I do, and you don't know what I've done.*

* * * * *

I already knew that Mark, Janet and the kids were inside, and inside for the evening, so there was no need to heed the first instinct, which was to round them up like the naïve herd they were. My faith in Colin's stakeout was nothing more than courteous, but I was already itching to hear of their arrival. I hadn't yet managed to master the nerves,

but at least my problems were with someone else, and someone capable of doing something for me.

Wary of stewing in the fear and the uncertainty, I left the cold sweat of that dungeon and joined the family in the sitting room. Amy had spent the afternoon with her fallen boyfriend, and was recounting the latest on his recovery to her parents. He had a more teenage slant on my heroics that warm afternoon, and I listened with genuine interest, accepting the fresh accolades with grace. Thinking about my involvement there, and the police surveillance now making its way to my side, the one word kept coming to mind: *accident*. That or *stupidity*.

I sat and smiled and grimaced, laughed heartily at bland comedies on television, and ate like a Trojan when Janet rustled up a tray of snacks close to eleven. There was a tattered book of classic dream explanations on the newspaper table in the corner, and I feigned idle interest as I flicked through, my recent tube dream in mind. I could find nothing of a sexual or erotic nature, and the only mention of trains advised against taking a long journey for at least a week. More depressingly interesting, I learned that to experience fear in a tunnel signifies that a wrong decision is soon to be made in a matter of importance. It was all I'd been doing lately, making wrong decisions and getting myself deeper into the mire. I really didn't need some stupid vision of a stranger going down on me to know that. The bubbling undercurrent of tension beneath my skin threatened to spill only when the mobile went off somewhere in between. I took it in the hall, listened as Colin told me that there were now two of his guys in a car nearby. I wasn't getting any more particulars, because he didn't trust me to not go peeking and announcing their presence to others. Any other time, I may well have indignantly defended myself, but round about then, the hat fitted snugly over the bumped contours of an idiot's head. So much so that I didn't even feel like smartly asking how he could afford to send guys to watch the house, but none to interview James Farrell.

I figured that the ache in my arm that night was due to the day's trembling, so I swallowed two painkillers and begged them to aid my sleep as much as my pain. I lay stock still in bed, waiting for the sparse cacophony of a house settling down for night to end. When it came, the

silence outdoors filled me with dread. I wished for a storm, thunderous rain, anything at all to fill the looming gap in which he could be stepping.

The gallery of the week's events was set on loop, almost as if my inner eyes were scoldingly reminding me of why I was where I was. Every single last piece of this was my fault. I wondered if accepting that would make it any easier, any less awful as I lay and waited. When sleep came, it was thin and stifling, a new blight upon all else. Ultimately useless, but for the fact it got me through to a new day.

I realised that it was Saturday when I woke, which explained the late show from both parents and children the night before. Already, minutes short of ten o'clock, the neighbourhood was beginning to swell with the happy screams of youngsters and birds and car doors slamming as Saturday morning shopping crusades got underway. I heard Chloe offering the parting shot in some argument with her mother as she bowled out the door.

'I'll be watching the house. I'll see when you're going.'

A reluctance to allow a trip into town inflict itself upon her friends, I drowsily assumed. And then the words registered and I remembered those who would be watching *her* as she left the house. There was no room to acknowledge that I'd made it past the first night, no relief or appreciation of the watchers. Instead, the window's sunshine and the morning's summer symphony faded to grey, a season's miserable developments rolled into one second. I cursed the nervous drag upon my heart and turned back into the pillow. It didn't matter where I was.

I waited until I knew that mother and feet-dragging daughter were gone before rising. Amy was in bed, and Mark would have still been on the golf course, finishing up his dew round. I didn't bother with breakfast, knowing that to pretend that I could keep anything down that morning would have been pointless. I wanted to ring Colin, but his apparent nonchalance and opinion of me led to the belief that he wasn't going to suffer my fears gladly. More than that, I wanted to call the only other number on my phone, even just to gauge the trouble I was in. Not knowing was the worst part. When I closed my eyes, I saw myself hanging from a cross, burning alive in the guestroom, choking on gas. Or else my head swung from a bridge over the Barrow by an old abandoned mill.

Fear is the mindkiller, and without knowing anything else at that warm empty breakfast table, fear was chewing away at my brain.

I remembered what had been said about keeping myself busy, so I surrounded myself with the notes I'd taken and the documents delivered. I didn't know what I was doing or what I was looking for. The scribbles of blue descended into a mess that hurt my eyes, and I gave up after no more than an hour with them. By the time Janet arrived home from town – alone – I was slouched in front of Sky News, generating another reminder of my limboed career. This was banished once I began wrestling with whether or not I could ask where Chloe was. I didn't want to worry anybody else, but I also knew of how easily she'd been approached by his prostitute accomplice. I decided to have a word with the younger girl myself, to warn her off strangers again. I was sure I could make up something about an old friend turning crazy that was believable but not hysterical. That settled, I headed for the kitchen and the mindless distraction of helping Janet put away the week's groceries.

After a light and leafy lunch, I managed to catch Chloe in the hall as she readied herself for the afternoon's playing. I bit my lip and tried to look as normal as possible.

'Do you remember the lady who gave you the note for me?'

'I think so,' frowningly.

'Well, the thing is, she's a little bit sick. She can be a bit crazy.'

'Like Yoyo?'

Yoyo was the estate loon, living with his two brothers, a sad old man with more than a team's fair share of screws loose, and double his own share of medication from Dymrna's. Harmless, but probably only barely.

'Yes, just like Yoyo. But me and her are fighting right now.'

'Why?'

The simplicity and the lack of complication in her questions felt like a breeze.

'Just something old. Anyway, I don't want you to talk to her if you see her, OK?'

'OK.'

She was more interested in getting back outside.

'In fact, don't speak to any strangers out there, OK? Can you promise me that?'

'OK.'

There was the briefest flash of guilt in her eyes as she said it, as though she knew she'd broken that golden rule once already before me. No need to press it.

'Good girl. And keep this as a secret too, OK?'

'Yes. Can I go now?'

'Course you can, midget. Have fun.'

'I will,' halfway to the door already.

'Remember – no strangers.'

'Alright.'

And as the little bundle of energy burst back out into the sun's arms, I really hoped that she meant it.

I pitched in as best as I could with the clean-up, and Janet asked if I wanted to head out to the arboretum near Leighlin later that afternoon. They were going in search of some bits and pieces for the new patio area beside the wooden shed out back. I found something like pity in her eyes, figured that she thought I was stifled with my injury, confined to a boring holiday indoors and little else of interest. That particular notion was a damn sight more attractive than the truth. I accepted, consciously drawn to the umpteenth distraction and the opportunity to usher through another few hours. It would take me nearer to an end to this mess.

I went back to the room to tidy away my notes. In flicking through the contents, I was pointed back towards all that I'd learned not even twenty-four hours prior. Huge developments that I'd only been allowed to wallow in for minutes, torn from me before I'd had chance to even contemplate telling Colin. It wasn't right. I knew so much, more than the Guards, but I was pistol-whipped into submissive silence by the head player. The nervous irregularity of my heart caused me to stagger a little as I made for the mobile on my locker. Time to check in with Colin. I didn't care about passing on any of my new information, or even truly if he had any news for me. I'd spent a full evening and morning on my own with this torment. I needed comfort of some kind, and even his voice would do.

'Tom, what can I do for you?'

'Not much. Just checking in with you, see if there's any news.'

'Nothing to report. What about you – did you go poking for the guys out front?'

He made it sound like a joke, but the suggestion was very real.

'No, I haven't left the house since. I'm going out this evening. I'll be careful.'

'Where?'

'Just to pick up some garden stuff with the brother.'

'Well, keep your eyes peeled. Let us know if you see anything.'

'I will.'

'As it happens, I might need to take the guys back in. Needed elsewhere.'

'What? Where?'

'Nothing to do with our case, don't worry. Big drug find and a related domestic down the county. You'll read all about it soon enough.'

'So you're just taking them away? Is it safe all of a sudden?'

I didn't even try to keep the disgust from my voice. As a team up against Caller John, we were deteriorating with every passing conversation.

'Was it ever explicitly unsafe, Tom? I don't have unlimited resources at my disposal. If there's a genuine threat, fine, we can move you and the family to a safehouse while this goes on. But you've said yourself that there was no direct threat made.'

'He threatened Chloe, for Christ's sake.'

'I know that. And if you want to move everyone out, we can put that into motion.'

It was hardly the kind of decision to be made in haste, and the way he teased the words suggested that he wouldn't recommend it himself. I scratched at my temples, overheated.

'No, I don't want to do that. They don't know that this is going on.'

He sighed.

'Look. If anything changes, let me know. For now, all you have to go on is that you've upset this guy, and he hung up on you. No mention of retribution. If you look at what he's been involved with before, it's not exactly run-of-the-mill revenge, right?'

'Right.'

It meant nothing.

'He may well come back to you. He may well never bother you again. We're still working on him, Tom. I might have something on the blonde hooker next time we speak. In the meantime, I should be able to have someone back out there by nightfall.'

'Thanks.'

'Broad daylight in a busy estate isn't going to happen.'

'I guess.'

And as he left me, I marvelled at how he'd somehow managed to make me feel worse than before the call. To grab his full attention, maybe he'd need to know about James Farrell and the name that had so enraged our friend. Because until then, his measurement of the gravity of my situation was always going to fall dangerously short.

The road to Leighlin was the same we'd used coming back from Kilkenny, and the same I'd used with Marie on my way down to Waterford. Both days seemed an eternity away, lost and confused in the mists of time by the events that had followed. Mark made some kind of comment about Milford and old times as we passed the turn-off, but I was elsewhere, seeking out the brooding mill across the fields. Even that afternoon was an innocent eon away from today's games.

We spent an hour or so in the relentless sun trap of the arboretum's yard, moving from patio furniture to trellis fittings and on to bedding plants. There was the constant hum of traffic from the road hanging overhead, and the sounds of occasional customers barking orders at staff lifting their purchases into the backs of pickup trucks. It was a pseudo-idyllic fracture in the worried gnaw of the day, and I was doing my best to appreciate it. Having never owned a garden or anything more outdoor than a small balcony within straining view of Battersea, I was fundamentally useless when it came to advice, but they kept asking anyway. Janet's trolley was piled a respectful height by the time she'd finished, and Mark had a mournful droop as he trudged behind, reaching for his plastic. There was a small queue ahead of them at checkout – a couple of born-again gardeners, by the look of their wares – so I grabbed a Coke from the machine out front and sat myself down on an upturned terracotta urn by the seating area. The baked warmth of the clay soaked through the seat of my jeans, racing to battle the cold liquid in my throat.

The words and thoughts I'd been ignoring began to slowly seep upwards from the ground, knowing they had an audience when I was alone. Their arrival was hastened with a jolt when the phone started shaking against my thigh. Brown fizz spilled out onto dust as I rushed to pull the handset from my pocket, sending the can flying. The number glaring at me from the screen was not Colin's, but it was pointedly familiar.

'Before I go any further, I am not here to waste time listening to any fawning apologies or excuses. What's done is done. I am going to speak, and you are going to listen. Understood?'

For a man who so prided himself on the study and understanding of others, he was offering no consideration for shock. I didn't process a single word of his verbal spray, knowing only that he'd ended with a question. There was something caught in my throat, and clouds rose from the ground as my trembling leg twitched. I stammered what I hoped to be an answer, watching the pool of cola shudder as the can continued to leak.

'Yes.'

'If there is one thing I despise more than your alarming ignorance, it is the beginning of a project that will never be finished. I have not yet been tarnished by an incomplete undertaking, and I certainly do not mean to begin with this book of ours, despite your incompetence.'

'No.'

Anything more than a single word was beyond me at that time. All he needed was compliance. I could do all else later. I could see Janet beginning to beckon me from inside the main store building, withdrawing as she saw the phone pressed to my ear.

'I cannot alter the fact that you have been infected, but we shall press on regardless. I want you to meet me tomorrow afternoon.'

'What?'

The word came out in reflex, even before the absurdity really hit me.

'You heard me. We meet tomorrow afternoon, in McDevitt's pub, on the Tullow-Castledermot link road. Do you know it?'

'Yes.'

I'm not sure how, but I knew the road.

'Good. Nice and public, no need for any knee-jerk paranoia. I am not gunning for you.'

'No.'

I hadn't even had time to be concerned.

'You will need a notepad and pen, needless to say. We have work to do.'

'Right.'

'And it should go without saying, but given your recent performance, I won't take anything for granted; you will not breathe a word of this to anybody else. I will have contingency measures in place, and if I suspect anything, you will regret it for the rest of your miserable life. That is a promise.'

'I won't say anything.'

'Why is it that your word means nothing?'

He paused, giving me time to defend myself, but I couldn't.

'Regardless, I have to move on. I am placing my chips on the square of hoping that not even you can be so stupid again.'

'I won't.'

'Fine. I'm sure you're somewhat daunted by the prospect of a head-to-head, but I'm not sure that I care. You have ensured that such steps are required, so this is on your neck.'

'I know.'

'You had better. Three p.m. on the dot. Bring no-one, tell no-one, and we'll see if we can't get this project back on track.'

And that was it. Left alone again in the weird garden space, ears burning with the strict resonance of his voice. He had not lilted or broken from the one tone once. I didn't have time to go over anything because Mark and Janet were edging their way out through the doors and back towards the car. Three p.m. at McDevitt's. That was all I could remember. Too much daze and too much haste, but something was kicking off inside me as I watched them load up.

All the way home in the wagon, with my mouth working on polite autopilot, I couldn't figure out which had the upper hand: the hook of excitement embedded in my flesh, or the all-over body wash of relief as panic turned chemically. I'm sure I managed a reasonable job of feigning attention from the backseat, whereas in reality I was miles away. More specifically, back in the pulsing hub of the rented car outside Farrell's surgery, splashing around in the facts that were falling together. His new

name. How he was now controlling people he'd once controlled as children in a home in the West. How there was still one loose cannon – twice denied the completion of her macabre task – and the old ally who'd recently thrown her out. How I was entangled, commissioned to write the memoirs of this nutcase, secretly probing away on the side to hurry up his capture. How near I'd been to ruining everything, and the reprieve handed down to me by his anal compulsiveness. I could feel tears welling in my eyes, and chewed my face to hold them back. They could come when I had no-one watching to answer to. And when I got back to the soft solace of my own room, I dropped myself to the bed and allowed a full day's worry to secrete down my cheeks. It lasted minutes, but it felt like it was never going to run dry.

I dried my face and waited for a silent hallway before bolting for the bathroom. One cover-up splash of cold water later and I was back in the room, ashamed of myself for breaking down, but understanding why. I sat on the bed and waited for composure to return – to attempt anything while so affected would have been pointless. Once calmed, I was able to assess things more clearly. I needed to be prepared for the showdown. There could be no more slip-ups. He needed to know that I was completely on board, not a threat to him or his stupid book. I needed his trust. And ironically, I then needed to go straight to the phone in the hallway – dedicated comms. channel open again – and give Colin the latest. No mention of the meeting, of course: I did not doubt Caller John's threat. I wasn't going to hand myself over to any new unnecessary risk. All they needed to know was that the immediate danger was over: he wanted his book finished, so he needed me.

There was no answer, and my eager call went through to his machine. Hadn't he said something about heading down the county? In the ten seconds it took his recorded self to instruct, I decided that it was safe to leave such a message on a police phone. And save for a couple I fear I may have left on Heather's friends' numbers during my residency at the hotel near the station, it was the worst message I'd ever left, anywhere.

'Colin, it's Tom. You were right. He got back to me. It's not as bad as it was. He's not finished with the book, he wants that finished. So we're to keep working

on that. And you, I suppose, keep doing what you were doing. It's back to normal, if that's what you'd call it. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. Right, bye.'

I took the mouthpiece away from my retarded lips and winced. A sudden rush of blood and I was worrying if maybe I'd be arousing suspicion by sounding so useless on a machine. Would he know that I was keeping something from him? Worse still, would he have access to someone who could analyse a *recording* of my voice? A recording handed straight to him? Why hadn't I thought of that before stammering my spastic way through the thinnest of truths? Now, instead of only having renewed energy and a nervous wonder to play with me, I had this.

* * * * *

Two weeks had passed since the meal I'd had with Mark and Janet in the small Chinese place down town. As she hijacked me in the kitchen, fishing for some kind of juice, she reminded me breezily, asking if I fancied going out again that evening. In a split second, I remembered that the occasion of that meal was also the night of Brian O'Toole's abduction. She continued, suggesting that we go a little earlier, and make a family thing of it. The instinctive and instant worry fell from me, and I signed up heartily. Internally amazed at just how much had been let happen in one single fortnight.

Within the hour, the five of us were sitting down to an authentic red check tablecloth in Luciano's. Though we held back ever so slightly on account of the girls being there, Mark and I helped ourselves to the house beer, finding it syrupy yet light. Our plates overflowed with grilled chicken, pasta, glorious sauces and dressings, with a communal pizza margherita sitting largely untouched in the middle. Mark and Amy were arguing – as I assumed most fathers and daughters did – about her intended patronage of the new tanning salon in town, conveniently just a few doors down. He was attempting to deflect her with humour, referring to the desperate paintshop as “The Bronzed Slapper.” It ended abruptly when Chloe started asking about slappers. The bill was refreshingly painless, and I happily paid back the initial treat by covering it myself. Back at home, we three adults stayed up with a couple of more familiar beers, half-watching some Polish flick on TG4. By the time they'd left me

Home

alone, I was still itchily wide awake, unable to sleep. The alcohol stang my senses, heightening and slowing everything into great lumbering tower blocks of importance. A meeting with Caller John. An entire *world* with him that Colin knew nothing of: interviews with Lynskey and Farrell, and now a face-to-face with the main man. I struggled to believe how deep I was in it all. It seemed absurd in the sudden midnight silence of the family home in Brooklawns. But it was real, and the biggest play yet was waiting for me when I next woke.

Home.18

Sunday morning came without the kind of mental fanfare I would have expected for a day of such importance. In fact, I had to search for a moment to remember why my alarm was whispering so early on the Lord's Day. When it came, the recollection fixed itself to a sudden new knot in my stomach, one that would grow larger and sorer as the day progressed. Most – if not all – of the significant events in my life had arrived unannounced, with no time to ready myself. This one was different. This one lay at the end of a long and treacherous blood red carpet.

I got up, washed, and attempted to address the rumble in my gut by throwing together a quick fry. I closed off the kitchen so as not to wake the appetites of the others. I'd bought the Denny delicacies in the local supermarket at some point during the preceding week, so there was no guilt involved in helping myself. I cursed the crackling oil as it gained volume, wanting to keep the morning my own, and ended up with slightly undercooked food as a precaution. Though it battered my hunger, it did nothing for the apprehension. Each pork mouthful brought a new question. What were we expected to achieve with this meeting? Would there be any format to it? Would anybody else in the pub notice? Would he have anybody there? How would I recognise him – what would he look like? As I wondered at pace, I was reminded of how much he knew about me, and I shiveringly accepted that if anybody would be doing any recognising, it would be him. It took no leap of faith to assume that he would also know what I looked like.

Increasingly uninterested in speaking to anyone, I stacked the dishes in the sink and escaped back to my room before the girls stirred for Mass. In adjusting the pins on my sling, I tried to figure if he meant for me to take a taxi to our meeting place, or if he was just wholly unsympathetic to my condition. This latter option seemed more right. I expected and deserved punishment for exposing my indiscretions, but given the trail of pain left in his wake, I was actually getting off lightly in comparison.

I took out my notes, and began filling a fresh page on the pad with the questions I would ask if given a chance to. It was best to be prepared. I wanted him to truly believe that I was submerged in the project. While Colin continued to investigate around us, I needed to keep Caller John close. And if that meant lolling in the stench of his pocket, so be it. Soon enough, I'd moved on to a second page, finding that the queries were pouring from me as I flicked through the work done so far. I discovered how easy it was to sink fully into the role when genuinely dedicating myself to it. Seeing the preparation swell, I allowed myself a nervous smile, believing that I might just be able to pull this off.

Nearing lunchtime, I found that I still had no interest in company. I certainly couldn't sit down at the table with the others. I ghosted up to the kitchen, and sheepishly announced to the assembling family that I was meeting a friend for a meal later that afternoon, and wouldn't be joining them. With a coy grin across her lips, Janet asked if this *friend* drove a silver Mondeo. I dismissed the notion playfully, a little surprised that she didn't appear to disapprove. Maybe she figured that I deserved something after the summer's developments.

I waited until I knew that they would all be eating before making a dash for the car. Were they available, either Mark or Janet would have insisted on driving me wherever it was I needed to go. That couldn't happen. I needed to go alone. I sat into the Primera and pulled my arm free of the sling again. I didn't bother looking back as I drove off, an hour to kill before arriving at the most important summit of my life.

I drove around the outskirts of the town, swapping one main road for another, circling the fringes of Carlow three times in total. One old-timer, kitted out with flat cap and hailing stick, eyed me with some interest as I thrice passed by his post on a quiet link road near Graigue. Second time around, I watched him glare in the rear-view until I was out of focus. Next and last time, he looked capable of citizen-arresting the disturber of his peace. The other side of his checkpoint, I panicked about being delayed by questions from a bored Guard. I checked the clock on the dashboard. I wouldn't be bothering the sunning coot again. It was showtime.

My arm began to ache as I headed slowly but decidedly back across to near enough my starting point. Past the limits of the last estate tacked on to the suburbs, I was driving through countryside in seconds. Ragged hedges and the farmer's fields behind them, occasional blasts of colour when gates broke the grey green monotony. The happy gold of a wheat field, the important red prow of a tractor tending to unploughed acres. The road was busy, but not so much that I couldn't let my eyes wander to the left and to the right. I turned off the main route about three miles out of town, and headed down a narrow and deserted branch. New and blooming homes on either side, far enough apart to retain a respect for the surroundings. Just past the skulking firs of the community's forest, I came to my next turn, under the arch of the old gatehouse of Duckett's Grove. Almost perfectly intact, the granite face of the tower and its gateway glowered down at me. Once the guardian of the great house away behind her, the turret now saw no more than casual strollers and riding school pupils pass under her wing. I slowed down, edging the car onto the gravel clearing in front of the curved edifice. In the ditch to the right of the tower, I could see loose rubble – a suggestion that though her face was proud, she was crumbling sadly beneath. A crow peered down from between the battlements at the top, calling out to no-one in particular, the caw piercing the silence through my open window. For some reason, it reminded me of the swan I'd watched minutes before going to interview Lynskey. Shuddering, I drove through, feeling the arch over me as I did so.

At the end of the long and straight driveway, there was a turn to the right, and the one to the left. It had always felt like how I imagined pulling into Brideshead would feel, the family's beige land falling away from the path, as far as the eye could see. All the while, I could see the ruins of the main house coming closer. Destroyed by fire in the 1930s, now only her stables were use for anything, housing a small riding school. The striking gothic grandeur of the mansion remained, the thin wire fence at the roadside an insult to its gutted majesty. Again, I slowed as I drove past, seeking some kind of comfort from this old friend, but finding only a summer hollow in the blacks of her many ivy-clad window eyes.

At the bottom of the grass-edged lane and its surrounding carpet of green, I came to the Tullow-Castledermot road. I paused at the

junction for longer than I need to, blinking at the open road either side of me. This was the last leg of the journey – the pub lay no more than a mile or two to the right, as I remembered it. With a heavy sigh in my ears and all kinds of people pulling at my heart, I checked the clock and slowly pulled out into the approach.

Minutes later, still having to convince myself that this was the way to go, I was slowing to halt just opposite McDevitt's pub. With cars beginning to appear on the road behind me, I had no time to spare. I slipped across the oncoming lane and into the car park. Somewhere in the dark depths of the pit under the cattle grid lay the point of no return.

The pub itself stood back from the road, its generous parking area dotted with saloons and vans, the occupants no doubt enjoying the *Grade A* carvery advertised on sign boards outside. Behind the warm dormer building, the landlord's land gave way to the gentle slope of a hill, graced by some kind of stone monument at its peak. I eased myself in beside a navy Mercedes and parked. My heart pounded ferociously as I reached for the notepad with its bulge of extra documents. I got out and exhaled deeply. Instinctively, I padded down my pocket, checking for the mobile. No sign. I broke into a worried curse, but abandoned it when I realised that I'd be sitting next to or across from the one person I needed the phone for. And there was bound to be a payphone inside if I really needed it.

I wasn't to know that Colin O'Toole would be calling my mobile round about that time, ringing to tell me that they'd found my blonde prostitute assailant. And why she wouldn't ever be telling us anything about her mysterious and unusual client, or anything else for that matter.

* * * * *

A local barged out past me as I neared the entrance, muttering unhappily to himself in a cloud of Guinness fumes. Inside the porch, there were two doors to choose from – Bar and Lounge – their frosted glass offering no clue as to which I needed. The wall directly in front of me carried dozens of frames and faded photographs; stern football teams, scenes of threshing and summers past. I could hear the busy clink

of diners and children coming from the lounge. It was safe to say that he was unlikely to be a family man, so I decided to try the bar first. I pushed through, scanned the stale air and the few uninterested faces, not sure of even what to look for. And then came the call, clear and friendly, yet impossible to ignore.

'Tom, over here.'

The voice came from an area by the second of two windows facing the bar. I was barely in the door, standing at the end counter, and he was waving at me from his seat in front of the window. Head down, I walked slowly towards him, embarrassed and nervous. I could have sworn that I felt eyes on me, but if I had looked up, I would have seen that his were the only ones. I could hear my pulse over the murmur of the dozen others in the room, distributed at tables and in front of the taps. I stopped in front of him and discovered that I didn't have a word to say. All the preparation in the world, and here I was to be, struck dumb before him. I lifted my eyes to catch his, and I was instantly amazed to feel nothing.

'I think you'll understand if we forego the physical pleasantries, Tom. Now, go to the bar and get yourself a drink. Whatever you want. I have an arrangement with the bartender. Get me another Scotch while you're there.'

I turned away to the bar in a kind of propelled daze, the way a wall-fallen child can be guided to bed at midnight without complaint. There was something in his tone making a mockery of non-compliance, and besides, I was entirely consumed with the task of trying to process the physics of the man I'd seen. The barman approached, holding up my thoughts.

'What'll it be?'

'Just a Scotch, please. And a Seven-Up.'

I didn't need alcohol to be drunk. He clinked through the order, leaving me alone for half a minute. The man sitting quietly behind me was not the man I'd expected to see. Small. Thin. Balding. Perfectly circular glasses. The soft, goofy expression screamed of one thing and one thing only; weakness. The barman returned, placed our drinks on the counter, and nodded beyond my shoulder.

'You're with your man there?'

I didn't need to turn. Here was his arrangement.

'I am.'

'I'll run it up so.'

He moved on without a word or going near the till. I caught my pale face in the mirror, and Caller John's behind. There would be no delaying. I pulled the two glasses together with my uninjured arm, and carried them back to the table. Two empties already sat in front of him. My notes lay exactly where I'd left them, and he locked eyes as soon as I sat.

'Going for the clear mind approach, I see. Commendable. I find I need a heroic dose to get myself going these days, but you never lose the taste.'

He cocked his head, keeping his pupils fixed to mine. Something was uncomfortably wrong. I muttered 'no', and tried desperately to oil the wheels of my mind. His lips curled into a faint smile.

'I see you've come prepared.'

I took the opportunity to drop my dull gaze to the notepad.

What was wrong?

'Yes.'

He chuckled. It sounded out of place.

'So I'll be doing the talking for both of us then, shall I?'

It angered me. I looked up again.

'That was the idea, wasn't it?'

And as soon as I spoke, it came to me. My head glided back on my neck, actually reeling. My cheeks began to swell and burn.

'Sure, sure.'

He had started to reply assuredly, but changed tack as I shifted in the chair. He was amused.

'Is there something the matter?'

You bet there is.

'What's going on here?'

'Excuse me?'

'You heard me.'

I now had no problem boring into the dark brown pits of his eyes. I was empowered by the discovery.

'I beg your pardon, Tom. What is the matter?'

'Your voice. You're not him. Who are you?'

I could have beaten myself, it was so obvious. Though the lilt and the slight trace of old England was in place, this voice was too puny, too nasal, too lightweight to be his. Such a frame could not carry a chamber so booming. And yet still he laughed. He belly-laughed generously for ten long seconds before running a hand through the thin hair above his left ear.

'Oh, this is priceless. Ten out of ten, Tom. Of course the voice you're hearing is not the same. But I can assure you, I am he, and vice versa.'

The maddening smile remained.

'What?'

'We are one and the same. I *am* the person you spoke to on the phone. Though the phone version of me was somewhat doctored.'

He paused.

'I'm giving you an opportunity to earn yourself a gold star here, Tom.'

'What?'

'You don't know what I'm talking about?'

'No I do not. And unless you explain yourself...'

'You'll do nothing.'

He looked away, dismissively emphasising the hollowness of my threat. The confidence alarmed me.

'Fine, you are incapable of getting there yourself, so I'll save you the embarrassment. Any time we spoke on the phone I was using a rather sophisticated piece of hardware to alter my voice. That is why you are noticing the slight discrepancies now. Satisfied?'

It was a virtual smack to my jaw. Hardware for a voice on a phone? Stunned, I was still defiant.

'No. I don't believe it. You – he – he's sent somebody else. He wouldn't risk it.'

Disgust crawled across his face. He practically spat his retort.

'Rubbish. What can I possibly gain by sending a double? How is that going to further the progress of our book?'

I had no answer. His argument carried the tone of being convincing, but all the while, *he was speaking with a different voice.*

'I will take it that you are a technological infidel, not at all familiar with the strides we've taken? If you really insist on pursuing the role of Doubting Thomas – every pun intended – then I can provide you with a URL for the very newsgroup I subscribed to for my research.'

Again, I was silent. Struck dumb. Hopelessly confused. He sighed.

'Do you really think I'd be asinine enough to allow you to get a recording of my actual voice? Are you familiar with the science of voice analysis at all?'

I thought instantly of the message left on Colin's machine, and nodded.

'Good. And if you wonder why I'm taking the risk now, I'm not. In the bag at my feet, there is a scanning device which is capable of scrambling any wiring devices you may have been stupid enough to deploy – homemade or otherwise.'

His chin snapped. I trusted his severity enough to not need to look under the table.

'I'm not wearing anything. I swear. Nobody knows I'm here.'

He seemed pleased at my renewed nervousness. The scorn had gone.

'Good. And if you're still uncertain as to my authenticity, you can ask me anything from our conversations to date, by means of proving myself to you. Go on, go ahead.'

Confidence. Laughing in the face of my fear.

'No, it's fine.'

'Go ahead, ask me anything.'

I couldn't. I couldn't risk insulting him any further. He had me convinced. I was right to have questioned him, but he had won.

'I'm fine. I believe you.'

He settled back onto the worn wine leather of the couch that ran the entire length of the bar's outer wall, and sighed again.

'Well then, now that we have that necessary nuisance out of the way, what do you say to getting this thing started?'

'Sure.'

The table to the right of us was unoccupied. To the left, two women were huddled together over two glasses of Guinness, engaged a little more closely than any of the regulars might have expected. From what I could make of their hushed conversation, they appeared to be German, and certainly not from around the parts. Through the window behind the man at my table, I could see the Primera and the Merc beside her. I wondered if it might have been his.

“Right. I am suggesting that I open the floor to you firstly, a little Q and A session, if you like. I’m sure you have questions, and if I can get you up to speed by answering them, I am happy to do so. We can then move on and I’ll fill you in on what I think is necessary. How does that sound?”

I wished that he didn’t speak so clearly, that I could ask him to repeat himself, just so as I could have twice the time to work through the swirling words.

‘Fine with me.’

‘OK, then. Shoot with the questions.’

He pointed with his eyes towards my bundle of notes. I was still too dazed by the unexpected and the voice debate to rely on my thoughts. I needed to check the notes anyway. I went with something obvious while I skimmed through the pages.

‘You said you have a device in your bag. Are you recording this conversation, like the phone calls?’

‘No. I’m afraid you are on your own. I can’t afford to be drawing the additional attention by having a dictaphone between us. It’s enough that you’ll be taking notes, though I’m sure you could pass that off as being a reporter from the local paper. Which would you rather I be – a spokesperson for a foothill hurling club, or a farmer moaning about renegade sheep?’

Waiving your right to another smartass comment about my career, I thought to myself, finding my place on the pad.

‘Whatever you want.’

He began laughing, and I happily interrupted.

‘Where is Emma Lynskey?’

His smile turned to a bored and serious grimace.

‘How would I know?’

‘Is it not part of your little game, knowing where she is?’

'It is, up until the point where she becomes a loose cannon.'

'What of her project?'

'What of it?'

'She failed. Twice.'

'That she did.'

'And the four kids were punished for their involvement in the first failure. They were to become the second attempt, correct?'

'That's not for me to know.'

He looked blankly back at me.

'You didn't tell her to go after them?'

'I can only guide, Tom. You have to allow a certain amount of artistic license.'

'Did you tell her where to get the first set of skulls?'

'No.'

'Did you intend for her to use skulls or real people?'

He shrugged, and reached for his Scotch.

'I didn't really care. I wasn't to know that she would be one of a rare breed – a willing criminal with a conscience.'

'What about the church burner, in Shannon? So guilty he took his own life?'

'Please. He killed himself because he was facing time in jail and he simply couldn't face it. Fact.'

'What about my involvement?'

'The book?'

'No. I interrupted the second attempt. The boys were being punished for interrupting the first. Does this mean I am a target for the third? Is there going to be a third?'

'Who can say?'

His evasiveness in the face of such a subject bristled the hair on my neck.

'You can say. You are the puppetmaster, remember? You're the one who hates unfinished projects.'

'That is true. And if there was to be a third attempt, I don't think you have anything to fear. The maths are incredibly simple – one of you, whereas there were four skulls and four boys. Your involvement is with this book, which, I concede, must seem like a punishment to you at times.'

'You're not wrong. And why are you so obsessed with this book?'

He sighed.

'I'm getting out of the game, Tom. I want to enjoy the benefits of the life I have made. And at the same time, I want the world to know of my achievements.'

'What life have you made?'

'One that you can only dream of. I have been both very shrewd and very fortunate in my business dealings. I have amassed quite a fortune and a lifestyle to match. I will be going into this in some detail with you, as it will be included in the book. Just not so much that I hang myself out to dry, you understand.'

'Do you have other projects on the go at the moment?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Like Lynskey and the others. More weirdoes.'

He smiled broadly.

'A lovely term. No, I haven't any other projects. I never have any more than one going on at the one time. That would dilute the focus, you see. A vital component of any undertaking.'

'So your trip up north had nothing to do with any other project?'

He paused, blankly baffled.

'Of course not.'

'The people you target – you said there were others. Are they all from the home?'

'For the most part, yes. The only real hold I have is over those people who have known me from that time. I have tried others, mainly petty things, carried out by persons who didn't really require all that much twisting. If you're able to listen, it can be easy to hear voices of dissension. Nowhere near as satisfying for me.'

'Did you bring James Farrell into this?'

'Farrell?'

'The doctor. Where Lynskey was staying until very recently.'

'Ah, of course. I know him as Jim. No, I didn't drag him into this at all. His involvement was unforeseen, but ultimately irrelevant.'

'So you didn't send her from him to anywhere else?'

'I did not.'

'Hold on a minute – he said that she said that you were still playing. Not that you'd finished, that you were out of the game, as you put it.'

'And? Do you think I control every single one of their thoughts and words?'

'Damn near to it.'

I muttered the words blankly, a thousand thoughts flashing past my eyes. It hit me suddenly: why wasn't he surprised to hear me speaking of Farrell? I had never given him the name of the person who'd let slip his nickname. He was taking another sip from his glass, so I did the same, feeling my nerve ends beginning to jangle. Something else was wrong.

'So you're saying that it's finished, but she's not?'

'Apparently so.'

'Does that not go against your pathological hatred of unfinished projects?'

He shrugged.

'Life goes on.'

The words sat uncomfortably on top of anything else he'd said. And still he wasn't making any comment about Farrell. Was he involved too? Had he managed to blind me completely with some incredibly convincing acting?

'I guess it does.'

I began ticking off the inconsistencies. The first, and most obvious – him. His voice. And how he looked nothing like what I'd expected. Preening that he was getting out of the game, days after setting up this meeting *because he hates unfinished projects*. Lynskey's skull monument remained unfinished, destroyed first by the four boys who then became the second attempt. I had saved them, and yet I was escaping the fate that had waited for them? I was safe because there was only one of me? I thought of the numbers, four and one. I tried to think of any kind of link. I thought of the family I'd left at the lunch table that afternoon, and counted with all the speed of a sloth. Four. Four family members, relations. The family of the man who'd wrecked effort two. Four family members whose safety I'd feared for just hours ago when I'd angered the man across from me. A family who now sat unprotected because I'd OK'd the removal of the police watch *because he'd called again*

to set up this meeting. My stomach lurched, and I felt my face begin to redden. Jesus Christ, what I had been lured into creating? The room shuddered with the violence of an earthquake. Panic seared through my veins and through my eyes, out into the stale air of the bar and the face of the bastard staring at me, head cocked to one side again.

'What's the matter, Tom?'

The wooden chair legs scraped on the stone floor as I pushed myself away from the table. I leaned across our drinks and whispered as fiercely as I could. It was all I could do to stop myself from clamping both hands around his chicken neck.

'You and I are going for a ride. If you so much as flinch, I am going to tell everybody in this place who you are and what you've done. The police will be here in minutes. Do you understand me?'

I didn't know why I was taking him with me. I just knew that I was getting back to Brooklawns as quickly as I could, and I couldn't leave him behind. He smiled smugly, and my heart sank.

'What about my things?'

'Leave them.'

I stood to one side to allow him stand and edge out past me. Every muscle in my body screamed, begging to be allowed to rain down in a volley of blows upon his frame. I fought them back, knowing that I needed to move quickly and not be delayed by interfering others.

'Where are we going, Tom?'

'You know.'

I didn't even look up at the barman as we got to the door, and he was either too busy to notice the tab walking out, or had already been taken care of. My new hostage strolled out into the sunlight, and seeing quickly that the car park was empty, I gave in to the urges and jammed my good arm in between his shoulder blades and pushed. He jerked forward, having to break into a trot to regain his balance. He didn't look back around.

'Is there really a need for that?'

'Every need. Keep moving.'

He was making for the Primera without any guidance from me. There was no doubting his identity any more.

Home.19

Dazed by the mixture of fear and abject rage, I shoved him again, this time into the unforgiving hug of the driverside door. Fumbling for my keys, I looked quickly around, and found the car park still empty. I pulled him away from the door, and opened the passenger side behind.

'Get in.'

He scrambled onto the backseat without a sound. I slammed the door on him, feeling it close against the end of his foot. I then eased in behind the wheel and reached for the unused steering lock.

'Down into the seatwell. If you so much as raise a finger, I'll brain you with this.'

I brandished the yellow steel, turning around to catch his grin as he slid down behind the seats.

'I'm impressed, Tom. Classic kidnap techniques.'

'As taught by you to Lynskey?'

The engine roared into life.

'What an odd assumption. It's not a graduate school for felons I am running, Tom.'

I didn't bother responding as I reversed and turned. I punched the wheel in anger, remembering that I'd forgotten the phone. If I had it, maybe Colin could get someone there quicker than I could.

'Do you have a mobile?'

'Afraid not,' he cackled. And even if he had, I'd have to beat it from him, which ate into a schedule I was already too terrified to measure.

I accelerated hard, bringing the car past the sedated saloons and out to the lip of the main road. Nothing in either direction, so I screeched out into my lane and headed back in towards Carlow, at seventy in seconds.

The road was bare for a Sunday afternoon, and I managed to maintain a barely legal pace most of the way in. The cheerful air to his taunts and questions - 'who are we chasing?' - travelled directly to my accelerator foot, dropping off a terrible sense of futility at my heart along the path. He didn't care that I had him. He didn't care that I was blindly racing back to a family I had suddenly decided needed protecting again. What was he so arrogantly confident of? And why was it chilling my

bones? The countryside zoomed past, and we were at the town limits within minutes, minutes that seemed like hours.

I was forced to kill the speed about half a mile from home, trapped behind feeder traffic. I cursed wildly, and he offered some bland commentary on weekend drivers. The luminous weapon remained in my lap, ready to be swung or hurled at a split second's notice, and I reminded him.

I pulled into the estate, catching the Children At Play sign out of the corner of my eye. I had a clear run to the turn at the far right edge of the green, so I ignored the suggestion and floored the pedal. Mark's place wasn't visible from the road – I needed to get around the playing area to see the houses in his small cul-de-sac. Number 43 was third from the end as I turned, and I could only crawl around the corner, hampered by a neighbour having relatives or friends over. I straightened the car up, two doors from home, and saw the unfamiliar silver mini-van parked deep in Mark's driveway. And the black-haired woman hurriedly shutting the back doors and disappearing from view.

Without thinking, I stopped at the curb and bundled out of the Primera, shouting. Something about the woman's haste and kidnapped boys in vans drew me to her and not to the house. There was no-one outdoors to hear me. I sprinted for the gate, hearing the van's engine suddenly howl, and I realised my mistake. Even before she'd pulled out, I had skidded and turned back on my heels. I saw the silhouette of Caller John's head popping up in the back, like some kind of curious prairie dog. He dropped quickly back down behind the seats, seeing me bear down on his disobedience. The van's tyres were crunching on the cracked concrete of the road, and as it roared past me, I had one leg back inside the car. My hands shook as I took the wheel, engine still running. I shifted the gear stick into reverse and stuck the pedal to the floor. In the rear-view, I could see open road, parked cars, and the silver van swinging around the corner. We jolted backwards, reversing more quickly than most people care to go forward. I silently begged anyone who'd listen to keep the road clear, because no sudden obstruction – pet, child or vehicle – would have stood a chance. Half a moment later, I was jamming on the brakes, screeching to a halt with a sound that brought faces to a dozen windows. I

reached across with my good arm and worked the stick frantically. Hands back on the wheel, I span the tyres and moved off around the green and after the van now approaching the exit.

She swung right and across the road with no more than the briefest pause. I was about a hundred yards behind, desperate to keep her in sight. I wasn't bothered with number plates or the model of the van. I was the one in pursuit, not the Guards – there was no time for Colin. There hadn't been enough time to definitely identify the woman as Lynskey, but I knew that her frame did fit. A change of hairstyle is nothing to someone on the run.

She took the next right, hurtling over the flat roundabout and down past the building site opposite the Presentation College.

'Your driving is no compliment to my posture down here, Tom. Why are we doing this?'

He spoke with a little less arrogance than before. Had he seen or sensed how near I was to Lynskey? I felt a surge of belief, and took the island roundabout at the corner of the college just as recklessly as she had, spilling out onto open O'Brien Road.

I knew that we were gaining on her. I could tell even from a distance that the van was older than the car, and that we had more in the tank. A handful of cars passed in the opposite direction as we climbed towards the junction at the top. They could easily have dismissed our speed as Sunday youngsters blowing off steam, but I thumped wildly on the horn, imploring them to report the disturbance to *someone*. Lynskey had to brake marginally to avoid a mini-bus already half-way onto the roundabout, and I took the opportunity to shave yards by edging onto the empty inner ring, not bothering with my middle pedal. Ahead of me, under the frown of the huge brown store at Braun, she cut across behind the bus and into my lane. The gap was down to about fifty yards; I was going to get her.

She took the next turn right, across the oncoming lanes, taking us down past the county grounds and Dr Cullen Park. She had to reduce her speed to do so, and still almost clipped a jeep as she swung the van violently. On the straight stretch beyond, she accelerated, and I matched

it. Adrenaline pumped loudly in my ears, fighting to be heard over the car. Ahead, I could see that the new traffic lights at the tennis club were red. It had struck me as an unnecessary addition, given the occasional traffic coming or going to either side. To the right was Oak Park, the county hurling and rugby grounds. To the left was the tennis club, and a handful of secluded, shaded homes. Nevertheless, the lights were red. And Lynskey was not slowing down. My heart skipped a beat as she ploughed through. If there was anything coming to the junction, they were all dead. I didn't have time to be thankful that there wasn't, because I too was closing in on the lights. And I couldn't afford to stop either. I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes, expecting impact. Nothing came. We were through also. I blinked and saw the van bounce up over the hump of the railway line beneath. Droplets of sweat fell to my lap as I stamped on the juice once more. Surely someone had to have seen something worth reporting now.

We climbed up over the rails and down the other side. I could see that we'd somehow stolen some more yards on her. There was another roundabout at the bottom, leading west into town and east towards Athy, but Lynskey careered straight through, out onto the deserted ring road. She was forced to take the tight circle slowly, and I got near enough to see the shape of her face in the wing mirror.

We crossed the Barrow, wide open road ahead, bordered by rough grass sidings and youthful trees beyond. I saw my opportunity. The Primera screamed as the speedometer stammered towards a ton. I was going to overtake, and edge her into the side.

It happened so quickly, I thought she'd hit something small on the road. That something would turn out to be a discarded glass bottle, probably from the ripped bag of rubbish at the side of the road. There was a muffled bang, and then the vicious shriek of metal on tarmac. As the van lurched heavily to the left, some kind of instinct had me beginning to press on the brakes. And as I slowed, the world ahead seemed to get slower too. The van shuddered for seconds, starting to turn in on its shattered front wheel. And then – ever so lazily – it fell over on its side, tipping in slow motion though still moving forward at speed. I let out a cry as it crashed down on the passenger side, the sharp bright sound of

windows breaking announcing the impact. I sensed Caller John lifting his head behind me.

'What's going on?'

Curiously fearful. Without thinking or looking back, I lashed out with my left arm, and caught him across the forehead. Pain darted the length of my body.

'Get down!'

He crumpled to the floor. My eyes were fixed on the van as it slid agonisingly towards a halt, leaving a trail of green glass fragments and chalky scrapes on the surface. It was heading for the patchy verge at the side of the road at the slightest of angles, taking forever to get there. I was keeping a distance, afraid that it might hit one of the road signs and spin back across at me. I needn't have worried. It left the road and skidded across the grass, seemingly picking up pace. There was never any hope of it avoiding both of the poles holding the sign advertising the next roundabout. It struck the inside pole with a sickening force, causing the rear of the van to lift into the air. It came straight back down, grinding into the earth, and my first thought was *they're all dead*. If they were in there.

I swerved in to the side of the road, ten metres behind the wreckage. I pulled the keys from the ignition, and got out. Locking the doors, I checked left and right. Not a soul on the horizon. I was alone. No phone. I sprinted towards the van, not sure of what I was doing, or how I was managing to fight back the tears.

* * * * *

I went first to the front of the van, which had met the collision head on. The windscreen was gone, and the woman's head lay slumped on her neck. There was blood on her face, on the steering wheel, and on the door beside her. No airbag. Her placid features were too distorted, so even now I couldn't be sure that it was Lynskey. Whoever she was, she was either very dead, or very near to it.

I moved back along the smoking chassis to the rear doors, almost not wanting to look. Again, the windows were gone, and I could see clearly through to the twisted pile of bodies inside. No faces, but a very definite *family*. Wearing clothes and colours I'd already seen earlier that day. It was Mark, Janet and the kids. No movement. I'd watched helplessly as the van had tumbled and crashed, and imagined the very worst. Now, with the faint copper scent of blood carrying out from inside, I was looking at it. My teeth ground together as I grabbed a door handle and pulled. Nothing. I howled again. I kicked out at the thin metal of the door, leaving a dent. I stepped back from the carnage in complete retarded frustration. I turned in the direction of the new low hum and saw the maroon car in the distance behind Caller John and the Primera.

Wary that the driver could just as easily dismiss the roadside scene as none of his business, I stepped out into the middle of the road and began waving my arms frantically. There was no way they were not seeing me. All the while, my heart thrashed loudly, the muddled glut of emotions coming together as anger when Caller John's head popped up in the foreground, a shadow in the window. I would get to him in time. My arm was killing me, but it was working. The car pulled into the side of the road, a good twenty yards behind mine. That in itself was a little odd, but maybe the guy wanted to keep his distance. As long as he had a phone, I didn't care. I recognised the new arrival as a BMW, and I started running towards it, as thankful as I've ever been for anything. The driver side opened, and out stepped James Farrell.

Already neck-deep in a marsh of shock, I didn't really feel this late top-up. He closed the door, and stood to attention. He looked apprehensive, feigning interest or concern. I broke out of my sprint and fought immediately for breath.

'What are you doing here?'

The words were out before I could even think about them. I felt my face burning. He seemed surprised.

'I'm on my way to a house call. I saw you waving me down. What's going on?'

Too quick. Too defensive. I didn't care.

'Do you have a phone?'

'Of course. What's happened here?'

'A crash. Can I borrow your phone? Can you call someone?'

I had quickly remembered that he was a doctor. Reaching into his pocket, he actually started to look like one. A heaven-sent coincidence?

'Right away. Do you want me to take a look?'

I wasn't sure if it made sense.

'OK. Quickly.'

I started to run back towards the van, still confused. He followed behind, beginning to wheeze.

'Who's in the car?'

I had my hands on the van door handle, still trying to yank it free. I thought I saw movement from inside, and my heartbeat soared.

'Your friend. And Lynskey's in the front.'

He disappeared around the side without a word, and came back as pale as his shirt.

'She's dead.'

I turned to face him, dribbling sweat. He looked as though he might cry.

'I know.'

'Who did you say is in the car?'

'Him. The one you're all so scared of. Where's your damn phone, man?'

He looked nervously back towards the cars, squinting in the afternoon haze. His chin shook.

'In the car. I'll get it.'

He was off on his awkward jelly jog before I could reply. I watched him reach the Beemer, and I turned back to the unrelenting door, calling the names of the four bodies inside. Nobody was answering. Not even with a moan.

I could see him talking on the phone as he walked back towards me, keeping his head turned away from the Primera. He signed off, and pocketed the small grey handset. He licked his dry lips, and blinked at me with something like desperation.

'They're on their way. I didn't know what to say about how many... I...'

He trailed off, eyes straying from mine to the ground. I spat through gritted teeth.

'There are four. My brother and his family. Your psycho friend dead in the front, and the bastard controlling her locked behind us.'

'Oh Christ.'

I turned away to hammer on the door again. He repeated himself, weakly.

'Oh Christ.'

'Jesus, do you think you could give me a hand here?'

'Of course. I'm sorry,' he stammered. 'What can I do?'

'See if you can get the front door open. I'm trying this one.'

I'd noticed a shard of rusted metal as long as a file in the grass near the back wheel. The door lock had warped, leaving a gap through which I was sure I could force *something*. I took the piece of metal and jammed it through. Farrell came back around.

'I need a lever or something. Do you have anything in the boot?'

I didn't look up. I was getting some traction with my own custom lever.

'How would I know? Rental car.'

'I'll take a look. We should put something down for the hazard warning too.'

It wasn't anywhere on my list of priorities. He was still talking.

'There's nothing in mine. Show me the keys and I'll check the boot.'

I cursed at his distraction, urged by the whine of the door beginning to give way. I pulled the keys from my pocket and threw them at him without looking. He would have been halfway there when the lock gave way with a groan, and the door cracked open.

'I'm in!'

I swung the broken side out and climbed into the van, standing on the left hand wall. She had come to rest on a slope, so I steadied myself with one arm pressed to the roof. The four lifeless bodies lay flung on top of each other, a silent and bloodied heap.

I didn't want to move anyone, but I figured desperately that I could get away with checking for pulses. Mark's head was resting at the bottom of the pile, a still pool of blood treacle below his chin, fed by the gash on his forehead. I pressed my index and middle fingers to his neck,

dreading the inevitable. But there was a *pulse*. Instantly, I drew back my fingers, assuming that I'd done it wrong, and it was my own I was feeling. I tried again. There it was.

'Mark!'

I wanted to slap his face gently, but some higher power warned me against it. I tried his neck again, pressed my other hand to my throat, found them gloriously not in sync. He was alive. Unspeakably elated and hopeful, I reached for the small pink arm poking out beyond his head. Chloe. I worked my fingers softly to her thumb, and back up her wrist. Pulse number two. I moved around the pile, finding enough parts of Janet and Amy to check, and found them alive too. I heard sirens getting closer and closer from outside, and the pounding of life in my ears. My life and theirs. The sirens were now screaming on the other side of the suspended van's undercarriage. I scrambled back to the door, and gave up fighting the tears.

* * * * *

The ambulance had pulled up behind the van, and two men in yellow jackets were spilling out onto the road. The blue lights continued to flash, aligning with the sun and my wet eyes to blind me completely. One of them took my arm gently.

'Are you alright? Are you hurt?'

I tried to focus on his face. Tanned, dark hair. Cat green eyes.

'I'm fine. I wasn't in the crash. There's four people in the back. They're out cold, but alive.'

The other guy was peering into the van.

'The driver?'

'Dead, I think.'

I'm sure that the flippancy surprised them, but when they learned the background and the intentions of the dead driver, they would understand.

'Right. We'll take it from here. There'll be someone along in a minute to check you out.'

Maybe there was blood somewhere on me. The guy at the door had raced back to use the radio, probably calling for assistance. His comrade placed a white toolbox of medical tricks inside the van, and

climbed in. For the first time in what seemed like hours, I breathed a broken sigh of relief.

The second ambulanceman passed me, and I stammered my thanks. He mentioned reassuringly that a second unit was on its way. I watched him clamber into the now-cramped confines, and I remembered the imbecile doctor. I walked quickly around the flickering ambulance, running my hand along its hazard markings as though it were a friendly animal. And then I saw the road behind, with one car where there should have been two. No maroon BMW. The cowardly bastard had run.

I made for the Primera, all the old rage and fear bubbling to the surface. Through the reflected blue lights on the window, I could still see the outline of Caller John's head inside, but I knew that something was wrong. Where were my keys? Why had Farrell run, and to where? I reached the back door, and peered through the window. Sitting slouched on the backseat, stooping in order to mimic the shorter silhouette of Caller John, was the crying and shaking shape of James Farrell.

I think I may have screamed. I know that I reached for the handle and pulled out the unlocked door with a force sufficient to tear the rotator cuff in my shoulder. The pain came out as a rain of bile and spittle as I roared at the pathetic wretch inside.

'Get out!'

He shuffled slowly along the seat, and stepped out into the sunshine, already flinching. He lay back against the car, waiting. Barely able to believe, I was struggling to put the words together, salt stinging my cheeks.

'Why did you... where...'

His wet eyes met mine, and became fierce. Whether it was a steely confidence in the truth, or a very determined lie, he was going to be convincing.

'It wasn't him.'

More sirens began to wail somewhere in the distance.

'What?'

'It wasn't him. I know that man. He's a patient. He's not him.'

I could not believe what I was hearing and seeing. This fiend was being *defiant*. I felt control beginning to slip away from me.

'So why did you let him go?'
'Because no-one would believe me or him.'

And that was that. I drew back my arm and smashed its fist hard into James Farrell's face. There was a new sharp pain in my shoulder, and another in my hand as fragments from his shattered glasses found their way into my flesh. He slumped heavily to the ground, blood pumping from his nose and a smaller cut under his eye. I had to crouch to get the next hit in, catching him across one bulbous cheek before he had time to raise his hands above his head in defence. I rained blows down on his fat arms, driving the glass deeper into my own hand. I offered him every name under the sun, and promised to end his miserable life there and then. Having stood up to begin kicking at his sheltered folds, I may well have followed through, were it not for whoever it was who pulled me off and away from him.

* * * * *

I'm told that they took me away in order to calm me down. I was given some kind of sedative, something to blur the edges of the babbled reasons I was giving them for my actions. I know that before the stuff had a chance to kick in, I was still making every effort to race back to the doctor being doctored, with every intention of finishing him off.

Home.20

The days that followed were a white blur of hospital walls, deep sleep, and faces both familiar and new. People came to tell me things, but never to ask. I learned of one confirmed death, and of multiple satisfactory recoveries from injury. I learned of how the crude anaesthetic used on Mark, Janet and the kids – the same used on the four teenagers – had probably saved their lives: unconscious and limp in the back of Lynskey's stolen van, they were thrown around less than they would have been were they sitting upright or awake during the trauma. They hadn't even known that they were in a crash. Their minor cuts and fractures would heal a thousand times more quickly than the shock of the story and their intended involvement in it.

I may well have managed an empty smile when I was told of how James Farrell did not want to press charges against me, despite the handful of witnesses who saw me pummelling the stricken doctor. It was probably Colin who brought me this particular piece of *good news*. I knew that he and I would be sitting down for a long and painful chat some time soon. I'm sure I could then offer a reason or two as to why James Farrell wasn't really willing to engage me again.

Colin was also able to tell me about the premature end met by the prostitute delivery woman. She'd been found in her own flat after curious yet tactful neighbours noticed a sudden cessation to her patrons' comings and goings. Her throat had been slashed, and she'd spent her last gurgling moments on the bed she'd made: it had been arranged to look as though she'd died on the job.

Somehow, they were all painting me as the hero in a finished picture. Knowing what I did, and how I had forced these lives into the hands of the crazy, it was all I could do to stop myself from screaming when Mark and Janet came to thank me. I sent them graciously back to the daughters who needed them more, and turned into the neutral silence of my pillow. It was soon soaked in tears, and condemning me every bit as much as I myself was.

Home.Epilogue

I have known terror, and I have known fear. I have known what it is like to be so consumed by worry to be unable to keep anything in my stomach. I have known what it is like to jump into an outnumbered teenage fight with noble intentions, only to spend months then watching my back, expecting punishment for getting involved. I have known what it is like to have to walk the wrong estates in Croydon, the wrong colour for anything. I have known what it is like to abruptly dismiss a scruffy youth near my workplace, and then wonder if every interested face that follows is a gang member doing some pre-retribution surveillance. All of this lives and breathes in my head, but never dies. I haven't yet found anyone able to understand, and I have long since accepted that this is a problem all my own. I create the drama. I am helpless. I don't do this to savour the rush or the living energy. Because once the incident has passed, and the adrenaline worn off, I am left with a heart weakened and aching with the strain of worry. This deep pain eventually slips back into the shadows, patient in waiting for the next time she may be needed.

Now, like most other times, it was the uncertainty that was killing me. When it came down to it, I knew nothing. Did Caller John or The Chipler have the same kind of control over everybody he touched in that children's home? Did I and all I hold dear have to worry about each name on Colin's list that did not yet appear on a headstone somewhere? How insistent was he that his awful project be completed? The boys had inadvertently ruined the first effort, and were to be punished through the second. I meddled in the second, and was supposed to see Mark and the others pay the price in the third. Was there to be a fourth? Had the whole thing died with Lynskey in the front seat of her stolen van?

As a child, you will sometimes ask a difficult question of a parent or adult, and then listen to an answer which is thin and just not good enough. When Colin came to my bed and told me that the doctor's BMW had been found a mile or so this side of Tullow, I dropped into a numb silence, and waited. The driver – shakingly identified by Farrell as the man who had taken his car – was dead, killed on impact when the car had left the road and careered into the trees at the edge of a small forest. He lay

there for two days before anyone noticed the tyre tracks. He had crashed while making his getaway from the accident scene on Sunday.

The news meant nothing to me, because I had no guarantee that it had been Caller John I'd met with that afternoon in the first place. Farrell's defiant words haunted my thoughts. Colin did his best to assure me, bringing the fruits of some fervent background work. They had narrowed down the list from the children's home, throwing up three names that could no longer be accounted for. One of these men, Peter Mooney, ended up dead behind the wheel of a doctor's car. The natural link that followed: Peter Mooney was the man behind all of the games. Round peg, round hole. I nodded and tried to blink wildly at Colin when he walked me through the conclusions. All the while, I was thinking to myself. *If nobody knew who this Chipler or Caller John character was, how the hell did James Farrell know what he didn't look like?*

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It's been two weeks since my release from hospital, and the daily emphasis has definitely been on repair. Not just of flesh, bone and muscle, but of personal ties and people lied to. I plan to tell Mark everything – even the things I'll be keeping from Colin – in the hope that I can earn back his trust, and ultimately his forgiveness. It's up to him how much he passes on to Janet and the girls. As far as they know to date, they were kidnapped to punish me for my involvement in Milford. This is the short and less horrible version of the tale, and one that preserves my role as hero rather than idiot, so it's probably best for all for the time being.

When Caller John reconsidered and set up the transparent interview in McDevitt's, I had cautiously assumed that all was civil again. I was safe, because he still needed me for his book. That Mark and his family could still be at risk had never crossed my mind. I'd simply stopped worrying about them. Distracted and selfish, I'd allowed Colin to take away his men, and then watched as the very people who'd taken me in that summer were left exposed for Lynskey to pounce on. It was this branch – more so than any of the others – I was thrashing myself with hourly.

I spent part of every second day with Colin. I'm not sure if he felt some guilt for removing the surveillance prematurely, but I got the distinct feeling that he was going easy on me. I used up hours in the hospital bed, working out what to tell him, and what to keep for myself. With his neatly cut-and-dried case – dead culprits, thank you very much – he was a thousand times more content than I was. He didn't know that I'd been to see Lynskey or Farrell; she couldn't ever tell, and he was sticking to the horseshit story he was feeding to the Guards. He'd taken Lynskey in without knowing anything about her crimes. He didn't know any Tom Lacey or anything about some person from an old orphanage playing sick mind games. He'd only been on the link road over the Barrow by coincidence, on his way to a house call out by Knockbeg. He didn't realise he was doing wrong by unlocking the car door to speak with the small man gesticulating inside, and had in his haste left the keys in his BMW. He certainly hadn't expected to be overpowered, or have to watch as the nimble stranger made off in his car.

I knew differently. I knew that regardless of whether the runt on my backseat had been The Chipler or a well-trained accomplice, he'd used whatever tactics he used to control Lynskey to coerce Farrell into setting him loose. It wasn't a decision the doctor made on his own. I knew he was every bit as scared of the mystery man as Lynskey and the rest.

When I told Colin about the doctor's real involvement – and how I came to know of it – his eyes bulged with raw emotion. He took his new notes with a detached professionalism, then laid down his pen to lay into me with careful wrath. He was astounded that I had kept so much from him, and aghast that I'd genuinely believed that I could have gone it alone. He was appalled to have not been given a chance to get near to Mooney at the time of our summit. As he shouted bile and disappointment, he made noises about possible criminal charges for jeopardising the investigations. I was ordered to hang around Carlow for a couple of weeks, to wait out his storm. In case they had any more questions, or wanted to bring me further to heel. Farrell would have to be hauled back in, of course – not that he'd ever betray anything important, even under threat of the law.

I can just about manage a couple of weeks, if needed. I'll spend the time trying to patch things up with Mark, perhaps even the parents. After that, I am gone. I plan to head back to England to take care of whatever business needs taking care of. Then I am off to Massachusetts. I have an old friend from London out there, running a tourism brochure for hotels in the area, and the open invitation I have to find my feet while writing for him still stands. I'd give it six months, see what comes of it. There was nothing but anger and its women for me in England. And nothing but fear, uncertainty and damage in Ireland.

There was the hopeful promise of a new start for me in the States, but I also knew that some things would stay the same. I knew I'd be waking at night, daydreaming during the day. Expecting a phone call, maybe even a personal visit. News of how the last act of calculated revenge had finally been completed. Of course Mark and his family were going to be careful and wary in a way they'd never had to know before. I too would be watching my back with dread until such time as complacency set in. There was nothing I could do for now about the constant throb of worry in my stomach. Nobody could tell me with any certainty that he *was* dead, that he *wasn't* waiting patiently to come again. It could even be one of his remaining drones from the orphanage, programmed before he wrapped James Farrell's car around a tree.

This, in itself, was the worst part of all. I just didn't know.

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The boy who would be a doctor had seen all of his friends and his peers suffer The Chipler's games, and he knew that his turn would come. When his pillow finally betrayed him with the rough scrape of paper, he came to know the horror of joining in so late. The longer the games went on, the more awful the tasks, the greater the risks, and the harsher the likely punishment. The words were as flowery as ever, yet there could be no confusing the chore. He was to take advantage of his rota duty in the kitchens, where he and five other boys helped with the preparation of the evening meals for children and Brothers alike. The Chipler wanted him to take dead rats from the old barn, the decaying kills of the scrawny school cat. The animals' entrails were to be removed and

added to the broth being prepared for the Brothers. The boy wept for a day, knowing that he couldn't avoid any of the pain.

On the day of his first trial run, he collected a single bloodied rat from the shed and concealed it in his clothing. He studied the mangled rodent in the solitude of a toilet cubicle, wondering how he could possibly cut one of them open. That evening, in the steaming bustle of the kitchen, he had the rat hidden in the sleeve of his tunic, testing the security. As he carefully lifted the lid on the Brothers' broth pot, making sure that the supervisors were occupied elsewhere, he thought sadly of how unfair his task was. Only six boys ever worked in the kitchen at a time, so there could only be six boys responsible. It was easier to beat six instead of a hundred. Distracted, he jumped when someone knocked something metallic to the ground on the other side of the ovens, and his arm jerked out across the bubbling soup. He felt the rat beginning to slide down his sleeve, and he jumped again. Off balance, he had to steady himself with the other arm, or else the entire pot would have gone with him. It happened so quickly, he was helpless. He could only watch in horror as the black animal slid slowly into the pot, disappearing beneath the surface without a show.

Terrified, he moved away from the pot, knowing that he couldn't go trying to fish it out without being noticed. He was called to from the other side of the kitchen, and brought over to scrub pans. He tied with the idea of feigning sickness and avoiding the meal completely, but that would probably just as much announce his guilt. Some time later, he took his place at the table, and waited with eyes shut for the world to rain down on his shoulders. There came a shout from the Brother who was doling out the soup. The boy wasn't to know, but the Brother didn't even need to pour out a single bowl to know that there was something wrong: he felt the rat with his ladle first time it went in. There were more shouts, and the sounds of people being pulled from chairs. Somebody came for him and dragged him up onto the stage where he joined the five others. Questions and angry red hungry faces. He tried to look as confused and as frightened as the rest. Nobody knew anything, of course, and he answered exactly as they had. All six were punched and kicked from the stage, out into the yard, and into the barn where they would share three nights with the cat and her dead rats. It was late November,

and bitterly cold. The boys didn't even bother trying to figure it out amongst themselves. They knew it had been ordered by The Chipler. They huddled together for warmth, and did not speak a word until morning. The boy who had started and ended his day in that miserable place fought manly against the tears, refusing to give himself away.

Though surrounded by Brothers and a family of children forced together, he was always alone with his thoughts and his fears. He knew that he had fallen short of The Chipler's target, but that was all he knew for certain. Would there be a punishment for his failure, or was the Brothers' retribution enough? Would there be more to come from The Chipler, or would he not ever have to worry about the notes under his pillow again? This in itself was just as hard as the beatings, the hunger and the cold nights in the barn. He just didn't know.

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The man who had failed the broth task had known that the call was coming. He might not have expected it so soon, however. In the long run, the timing didn't matter: a decision had already been reached. One that would bring a sort of relief he and his kind could only ever have dreamed of.

Once the crazy writer had been pulled off him, James Farrell was attended to by two of the arriving ambulance men. There was blood, forming bruises, and pieces of glass pricking his skin, but no serious damage done. They insisted upon taking him away, at least to a surgery in town, just to be certain. And so it was he found himself chatting numbly with an old golfing partner, bumped to the top of the open afternoon queue. As his friend cleaned and checked, James Farrell played the wide-eyed innocent, feigning as much shock as possible at the vicious assault he'd known. Whereas in the harsh light of the office, watched by the exact same anatomical models he had at home in Bennekerry, he was thankful for the clarity that each blow had delivered. No man or woman would ever know such needless pain again.

Once discharged, he took the account cab offered to him, and headed gingerly for home. There would be the clamour of police

questions and family concern to come, but for now – with his wife at the club and the girls out with Monique – there was peace and space to formulate. When the call came, he fielded it with a drowsy automation, one easily passed off as drug-induced. With a stack of his own appointment cards on the dash in his car, the channel was well and truly open.

The instructions were short and firm. The bastard needed money, food, a change of clothes, and the doctor's wife's car. James Farrell replied that he would need to wait until evening, and the return of his spouse. With the additional cover of night afforded, that was no problem, and he took a pen to record exact directions.

He spent the remaining hours alone gathering together what he would need. When his family arrived home, he fed them the carefully manicured tale he'd prepared, again sketching himself as a blameless bystander caught up in a tragedy. After a hushed meal, he retired to his room, apparently worn out by the day's events. Just past ten, he poked his head into the sitting room, and announced that the Guards had called, and asked if he could make it down to the station. He knew that by now there would be a sherry glass in his wife's hand, and hence no possibility of a lift. Instead, he asked for her keys, given that his own car had been embroiled in the saga. Of course it was a shame that Monique had been allowed out with her language school friends, but all the same, he felt up to the short drive.

He drove straight to Tullow, and stopped at a small takeaway on the edge of town. There, he waited with an alien patience and calm while his order was cooked. Two half-pounder burgers, two curried chips, two battered sausages, and two portions of fried onion rings. The very kinds of food his wife would never allow him to eat. He then followed The Chipper's directions to the letter, heading a mile out from town, down one unmarked lane, and into the belly of an unchristened woods. Half a minute of dirt track later and he was pulling up outside the abandoned hut. He assumed that the poke of dark silent hulk behind was his own BMW.

He took the quickly greasing bag from the passenger seat, and didn't bother locking the car. He rapped on the solid door of the hut with one shaking knuckle. The man he had released from the writer's Primera answered, a cautious scowl on his face turning to hunger as his eyes fell to the package of food. When he spoke, it came weaker than his backseat instructions. In the fading light, he somehow looked smaller.

'Ah, good man. Come in.'

He took the steaming bag from his visitor, and turned his back in making for a makeshift table: old threadbare sacks draped over square crates of some kind. A mobile phone sat atop of them. James Farrell watched, the rustle of paper almost identical to his recent steps on the forest floor. He reached inside the inner pocket of his light sports jacket, and slowly pulled out the handgun. It shook wildly as he brought it up double-handed to aim at the back of The Chipler's head.

'Turn around.'

The Chipler had removed one of the giant burgers, still wrapped in fat-stained white, with scarlet sauce trimmings. His face was blank, and only his eyes flickered as he locked them on James Farrell's hands.

'What's this?'

This was the insurance James Farrell had invested in when he first read of his childhood friend gassing the school. The shocked doctor had been holidaying in Dungarvan at the time, only miles down the road. His instincts had screamed of worry and suspicions, and a degenerate cousin had been able to source the small Beretta for him. Until now, there had been no reason to remove it from the attic.

'Get out here. Bring the food.'

He knew that his trembling voice betrayed the kind of weakness his new hostage could exploit. He stood back from the door, trying to keep at least ten feet between them. The Chipler placed the first burger back in the bag, and started walking forwards. He looked more intrigued than concerned.

'Again, I ask what is this?'

He passed through the doorway. Stepping quickly backwards, James Farrell shook his head and swung the gun in a pointing arc.

'No more talking. Around to the car.'

He kept himself aimed at The Chipler's head, both of them now shuffling through ferns and leaves, and around to the side of the tiny building. The Beemer lay waiting, loyal and patient.

'Get in. Backseat. Leave the food on the roof.'

The Chipler did as he was told, not looking around as he placed the bag and opened the unlocked door on the driver's side. The same door James Farrell had let him escape through only hours earlier that day. The doctor stepped carefully around to the open door, finding amusement on the small man's face.

'You can't do anything,' The Chipler began.

'No. No more. *No more!*'

James Farrell fixed his aim one last time, and begged of it to be true. Eyes squeezed shut, he jerked on the trigger. There was an explosion, and an electric jolt in his hands. A sudden new stench of fire. Terrified, he blinked rapidly, and tried to take in the updated landscape. Deep red everywhere, flecked by off-white lumps and other crazy colours. In the centre of it all, one very dead Chipler.

James Farrell vomited violently amongst the undergrowth. He then kicked up enough dirt and clay to ensure it would never be traced. He went back to his car, and placed the wiped and filed weapon in The Chipler's loose right hand. Through blood, he worked the fingers with care. Satisfied, he then closed the door on the dripping scene, and took the bag of food from its perch on the roof. Walking quickly, he stepped into the hut and took the phone from the crates. He tugged the sleeve of his jacket down over his hand, and pulled the hut door closed.

Still deep in an eerily placid fear, he sat into his wife's car, and ate everything he'd bought in Tullow. It was a struggle, given that his body still vibrated so horribly, but he was hungry. Hungry, dazed, weak, and only God knew what else.

When he had finished, he rolled the greasy packing into a ball, and felt the calm fall from his body like water from a shaking dog. He started the engine and pulled off and away. He knew for a fact that his wife's tyres were the same model as his own, so he didn't care about fresh tracks. Besides, it was too dry. There would be other questions, maybe even accusations. He would handle them. Everybody knew he was gentle

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and timid. Wouldn't say boo to a goose. He couldn't possibly be implicated in a killing. His family, friends and peers couldn't ever dream of anyone driving him to that.

Then again, they hadn't ever known mention of The Chipler. And now, nobody else would.