

1

Raymond Drew wanted to die on the towpath. Even if there was no sun, no blue sky to die beneath, he wanted it to be by the river. He didn't care if the ground was sodden with rainfall as he collapsed.

If he could manage it, he'd fall dead into the water. At least that way he could be sure. To survive and be brought to a hospital was unthinkable. They would contact his family, such as it was, and his sister Ida would go to his house.

And the things she would find there.

He should have destroyed them, but he couldn't, he was not strong enough to take that action and endure the consequences. It would be easier simply to die. At least if he was gone, he would not have to face that terrible discovery. The real Raymond Drew, the creature that had hidden beneath this human skin for more than six decades, would be revealed.

Raymond locked the front door of his house, the three-bedroom semi on Deramore Gardens he'd lived in for thirty years. Just one of many identical structures on this street, red brick, early 1900s, the kind of houses that middle-class couples and property developers were falling over themselves to buy until the financial crisis. Raymond had shared the first two years here with a wife he'd barely known, let alone loved. Dead and buried now, and he hadn't missed her for a moment.

He tucked the keys into his pocket. The grass of his lawn

looked like stubble on a drunkard's chin. He hadn't cut it in years. The man next door, Hughes his name was, gave up asking Raymond to mow it and did it himself every few weeks. The spring would soon start it growing again.

Not that it mattered to Raymond any more.

He left his car on the driveway, closed the gate behind him, and walked. The Vauxhall Corsa didn't have an MOT or tax. It hadn't been driven in months.

A few minutes took him down the shallow incline of Sunnyside Sreet, past the corner shops and Chinese takeaways, to Annadale Embankment. He avoided eye contact with students and housewives on the way. At the bridge by the river, he waited at the pedestrian crossing for the green man to appear and tell him to go. Like a good boy. Raymond had learned to be a good boy long ago, to be quiet, respectful, obey all rules while outside his home. Not to draw attention.

Once across the dark slow-moving water to the Stranmillis side, he walked south along the river's edge, beneath the bony branches of the still winter-bare trees. Past the newly rebuilt Lyric Theatre, on further, the blocks of apartments with their waterside views. Traffic rumbled to his right, cars, vans and lorries filtering in and out of the city, heading north or east.

That sickly swelling in his chest, pulsing, robbing him of breath. He did not slow his pace, even as the sweat dripped from his eyebrows. Cold on his back, running down his spine.

Raymond had gone to the doctor two months before. A soft-spoken and serious young woman, she had talked about medication, pills, things to ease the tired muscle in his breast. She talked about more tests, bloods, wires tethered to his skin, a specialist at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

It was serious, the young doctor had said. It was only a matter of time before an attack came, perhaps a big one. Appointments were made, a prescription printed on patterned paper.

Raymond did not keep the appointments, nor did he have the prescription filled. He simply wanted to know.

It had been a month since the fluttering in his chest had intensified. Then the dizzy spells, the cold sweats, the feeling of his torso being crushed by some invisible hand. He awoke throughout the night, gasping, wild horses galloping inside his ribcage.

Only a matter of time.

A cool wave washed across his brow, and his legs weakened. He gripped the railing to steady himself. Waited while the blood coursed through his body.

A pub just ahead, perched on the riverbank, tables and benches and umbrellas damp and pathetic in the grey. A drink. Just one last swallow to see it done.

Raymond entered the pub. The only other patrons were a pair of businessmen comparing charts over cups of coffee. They did not notice him. But the girl behind the bar did.

He approached. The girl smiled. Blonde hair tied back, dressed in black trousers and a shirt that clung to her form. He stared for a moment. Felt his teeth with his tongue.

"What can I get for you?" she asked.

A foreign girl, Eastern European.

Raymond had been to Eastern Europe more than once. Even before the Soviets lost their hold. He had tasted many things there. Things few men ever taste.

He went to reply, but his throat and his tongue would not obey. Sweat tingled on his cheek. Something pulsed inside his skull.

"Are you okay?" the girl asked. "Do you need help?"

"Whiskey," he said, his voice crackling in his throat.

She hesitated, a thin line between her eyebrows. "Bush, Jameson, Jack Daniel's."

"Black Bush," he said. "A double, no water."

She fetched him the drink, served it in a tumbler. The liquid glowed amber, swaying in the glass as it clinked on the bar top.

A shrill thought sounded in his mind, causing a moment of giddy panic. Had he brought any money? Raymond checked each pocket in turn, the fear building in him, until his fingers touched leather at his hip. He opened the wallet, sighed when he found a twenty-pound note, and handed it over.

"Keep . . ." His lungs betrayed him. He inhaled as much air as they would hold. "Keep the change."

A smile flashed on her face, then was swept aside by concern. "Are you sick?" she asked. "Do you need a doctor?"

Raymond shook his head, no breath to spare. He took the glass to the farthest table, pausing on the way to let another dizzy wave pass. Raising the tumbler, he smelled warm earthy peat, sweet caramel, spice. Heat in his throat, the aftertaste of aniseed.

As he sat sipping at the whiskey, a knot of pain tightened around his left arm. It travelled up through his shoulder and neck before hammering on the inside of his skull. He held the table's edge.

Not here. Not here.

Raymond downed the rest of the whiskey in one gulp, coughed, and marvelled at the constellations that flowered across his vision.

The girl approached. "Sir? I can call a doctor."

He shook his head, stood, made for the exit, carried more by his momentum than his legs.

Outside, he went to the towpath.

Here?

Too close to the pub and the houses. Half a mile downriver, past the boat club, the buildings would recede, nothing but grass and trees along the river's edge. He had walked the towpath many times, letting the quiet air enshroud him, the calm seeping in through his pores.

Another charge of pain coursed from his arm up to his brain, stronger than before.

Walk. Jesus Christ, walk.

His legs obeyed. Time bent and cracked around him. Grey turned to green. Civilisation faded into the distance, only the rough ground and the sound of the wind through leaves.

A woman and a dog. It sniffed at him as he passed, whined, smelling the death on him. His and that of the others.

A cyclist, wrapped in Lycra, a helmet on his head, skidding to avoid a collision.

"Fuck's sake, watch where you're going," the cyclist shouted as he pedalled away.

Raymond did not answer.

He stepped off the gravel path, toward the grass and weeds at the edge. His shoes sank in the wetness. Hard, needling cold swamping his feet. The river flowed past, fat from the rainfall.

"God, let it be now," Raymond said.

He laughed at the futility of his prayer. He and God had parted ways half a lifetime ago.

He dug his fingers into his pocket, the tips already going numb. His keys snagged on a thread. He pulled harder, and they came free. It took the last of his strength to toss them six feet. They

splashed in the water without a sound. At least none that he could hear.

Another shock of pain, bigger than his body could hold, raging up through his left arm, his shoulder, his neck, then an explosion in his brain like the birth of a star.

"Now," he said.

The water came to meet him, swallowed him, as tender as it was cold. A million images streaked through Raymond's mind, each one as bold and brilliant as the last, faces he'd known, many he hadn't, some of them twisted in terror.

They sparked and fell like the scatterings of a firework, falling into black, down to where the fire awaited him. Down into the final silence.

2

Rea Carlisle sat on the stairs, looking at the black plastic bags, a man's life wrapped up and ready to be dumped.

She hadn't seen her uncle for twenty-eight years, and she remembered the occasion better than the man. She had been six years old, a funeral in a draughty church whose location she could not recall. People had whispered, asking what her mother was doing bringing a child that age to a funeral? The babysitter hadn't turned up, and Rea's mother had scrubbed her face with spit and tissue before bundling her into her best Sunday school dress and dragging her out to the car.

Uncle Raymond had stood quiet and still throughout, had smiled and shaken hands with people who seemed to be as strange to him as they were to Rea.

Her mother embraced him.

"Och, Raymond, I'm so sorry," she said.

His arms remained by his sides, his back stiff and straight. "Thanks for coming, Ida," he said.

When they put his wife in the ground, Uncle Raymond brought a finger to his eye. But there was no tear to wipe away. Even though Rea could recall only the most vague image of his face, she remembered clearly how silly the action of wiping away a non-existent tear seemed to her.

She asked her mother about it on the drive home in the Mini Metro.

Ida stayed quiet for a while, watching the road ahead. Then she said, "Well, he was always an odd cratur."

After that, they never talked much about him. Rea knew her mother had tried to contact Raymond, by telephone, by letter, but never a reply. He faded from their lives like mist from a window.

The phone call had come a week ago.

Rea had been sitting at her kitchen table, eating a microwaved ready meal straight from the plastic container, scrolling through the listings of a jobs website on her iPad. She lifted her mobile knowing it would be her mother's name on the display. Ida had a knack of calling at awkward moments. When Rea was eating, or in the bath, or on the toilet, or trying to get out the door, she could almost guarantee the phone would ring.

"It's Raymond," Ida said.

Rea's mind scrambled to connect the name to anyone she knew. God help her, she didn't want another one of those verbal tennis matches where her mother insisted Rea knew someone while Rea swore blind she didn't.

Och, you know him surely, Ida would say.

I don't, Rea would counter.

Och, you do.

No, I don't.

Back and forth until Rea would be ready to scream.

Before any of that could happen, Ida said, "He's dead."

Rea heard a watery sigh in the phone's earpiece.

"Who's dead?" she asked.

"Raymond," Ida said, exasperation in her voice. "Your uncle Raymond. My brother."

The white wisp of a man by the graveside came back to her. The finger at the dry eye. The features she could not form into a real face.

"Jesus," Rea said.

Ida tutted at the minor blasphemy.

"Sorry," Rea said, not meaning it. "How did he die?"

"They're not sure," Ida said. "Maybe drowned, but they don't know."

"Drowned?"

"He was found in the Lagan yesterday afternoon, all snagged up in the weeds."

Rea heard a crack in her mother's voice. A sharp, high-pitched inhalation. She pictured a tissue screwed up in Ida's fingers, ready to dab at her cheeks. Keeping it all bound up tight like a ball of string in her breast in case she made a show of herself. Ida Carlisle was the kind of woman who wept at her kitchen table, a cup of tea going cold in front of her, at least one closed door between her and anyone else.

"They found out who he was from his wallet," Ida said. "It took them a day to find out he was related to me. The police called at the house this evening."

"Was Dad there?" Rea asked.

"No, he was at a party meeting. He says he'll be home as soon as it's over."

Rea suppressed a curse. Graham Carlisle made his wife look like a well of warm emotion. God forbid he should let Ida's bereavement get in the way of his ambitions. He'd had a seat at the Stormont Assembly for five years now, and they were grooming him for Westminster. They would announce his candidacy at the next general election. To him, all else was secondary.

"I'll come over," Rea said. "Give me half an hour."

Before she could hang up, Ida said, "I didn't know him."

Rea kept silent, left the space for her mother to fill with whatever troubled her.

Ida took a quivering breath and said, "He was my brother, and I didn't know him. I haven't seen him in near thirty years. I don't know if he still lives in that wee house. I don't know if he married again. I don't know if he had any children. I could've passed him on the street, and I wouldn't have recognized him. I should've known him better."

"You tried," Rea said. "I remember you writing him letters and sending him Christmas cards. You did try."

"I should've tried harder."

Ida brought another bin liner from the living room and added it to the row in the hall. The black plastic jarred against the clean featureless white of the walls. Even the stairs on which Rea sat had been painted the same colour. Combined with the aged black and white tiles of the floor, it gave the hall the feeling of an institution, as if it led to a headmaster's office, not a home that should have sheltered a family. Only the stained glass in the front door offered any relief from the monochrome decor.

Rea's father had promised to drop by and take the bags to the dump in his big four-by-four Range Rover.

Not that there were many to carry.

Raymond Drew had gathered little of the clutter that most people do throughout their lives. His wardrobe had been filled with cheap chain store and supermarket clothes, invented brands, shirts that come in packs of two, a suit made of a material that crackled with static electricity under Rea's fingertips. Every item

of apparel he owned filled one bin bag—minus the suit, which he was buried in—with another for shoes and belts.

A box rattled and clanged with a meagre selection of pots and pans, cutlery, and another held a toaster and a kettle. Yet another held a yellowed dinner set, plates of different sizes, cups, a teapot, all covered in a floral pattern.

“I bought that,” Ida had said when Rea found the set in a cupboard. “A wedding present for him and Carol.”

An old cathode ray television in the back living room looked like it hadn’t worked in years, and a music center complete with a turntable. The tone arm didn’t have a stylus. Rea looked, but couldn’t find a pair of speakers to go with it.

It was as if these things, along with the scattering of clocks and ornaments, were placeholders. Items set around Raymond Drew’s house to give it the appearance of a home. Like a film set, Rea thought. Props. She imagined knocking on the walls and finding they were facades made of plywood.

Most important of all, they had to search for letters, bank statements, bills, any official looking paperwork. Rea’s father had called his solicitor, David Rainey, before he’d even thought to comfort his wife. Rainey had told Graham to find any and all documentation that might help determine the size of the deceased’s estate. They’d need everything they could get their hands on to take to court and apply for a grant of letters of administration, the authority to deal with Raymond’s affairs. Once that was done, Ida would be her brother’s sole heir.

“I think that’s the last of it,” Ida said.

Rea counted them. Eight bags and boxes in total.

Ida read her mind. “Pathetic, isn’t it?” She climbed the stairs and sat next to Rea. Her voice resonated between the hard surfaces

of the stairwell and the hall. "What kind of life did he have? Here all alone. He had nothing. No one. There's not even a photograph around the place. Him or Carol. You'd think he'd have a picture of his wife, wouldn't you? But there's nothing. Just . . . this."

She waved a hand at the packed-up detritus below. Rea put an arm around her mother's shoulders. Ida fetched a balled-up tissue from her sleeve, touched it to her nose as she sniffed.

Ida Carlisle was a small woman, wider than she'd like at the hips, her hair lacquered in place once a week by a fey man at a city-center salon, grey roots showing through the dyed brown, the merest hint of make-up on her face. Enough to make herself presentable, never enough to be showy.

"There's always the back bedroom," Rea said. "There could be an Aladdin's cave in there, for all we know."

The door to the bedroom at the rear of the house was different from the others. The rest were panelled wood, probably hung there when the house was built a century ago. But the back bedroom door was a solid featureless white with a new handle and a lock.

The day before the funeral, a locksmith had opened the front door of the house, fitted a new tumbler and left them with a set of keys. They hadn't found the locked door upstairs until he'd gone. Rea's father had made a half-hearted attempt at putting his shoulder to it, but the door wouldn't budge. Rea had tried kicking it below the handle, like she'd seen in a police documentary, but she'd only succeeded in bruising the ball of her foot and straining her calf.

"There'll be nothing in there but old dust and air," Ida said. A tear escaped her eye. She caught it with the tissue before it could drip from her cheek.

"We'll see," Rea said, stroking her mother's back.

Neither Ida nor Graham Carlisle were comfortable with shows of affection. Hugs. Kisses. Cuddles. Such displays were for infants and television dramas. Rea couldn't remember ever being told by either of her parents that they loved her. She had no doubt that they did, but to tell her so would run against their Presbyterian grain.

At the age of eighteen, when Rea left home for university, she made a decision: regardless of whether they returned the gesture, she would tell them she loved them. And she would hug them, and she would kiss them. If that made them cringe, then tough luck. She would not live her life with her emotions tied up and hidden inside her.

"No point in worrying about it now," Ida said. "I talked to your father last night. About this place."

"Oh?" Rea asked.

"When we've got it all sorted, all the legal nonsense, we think you should have it."

The house had belonged to Raymond's wife, and she'd inherited it from her parents. When she died, Raymond had stayed on. Now, once the estate was settled, it was Ida's to do with as she pleased.

"But Mum, I can't . . . it's too much to . . ."

"It'd get you out of that shared place. You'd have a home of your own. No mortgage to tie you down. A house is too hard to buy these days, I mean for a girl on her own, even with the prices falling the way they have."

Rea shook her head. "But this place has got to be worth a hundred grand, maybe a hundred and twenty. You and Dad could have that for your retirement."

"Your father retire?" Ida smiled. "He'll not retire until he drops. Besides, he's got enough money put away to keep the both of us."

"I don't know," Rea said. "It's too big a thing. I can't get my head around it."

"Well, think about it. You'll see it makes sense. Dear knows, there's precious little left of your uncle here. Hardly anything to show for him being here at all. Whatever's in that back room, you can give it to charity, or dump it, or . . ."

She screwed her eyes shut. Her shoulders jerked.

Rea tightened her hold on her mother, brought Ida's head to her shoulder. The tears came, Rea felt the wetness through her T-shirt, and Ida seemed to melt against her. Only for a few seconds. Then it passed, and Ida came back to herself, sat upright, stiff and proper like before. Only a redness to her eyes offered any proof of what had happened. They would not mention it again, Rea was sure.

She went to speak, but Ida's mobile phone pinged.

"Och, fiddle," she muttered, reading a text message.

"What?" Rea asked.

"Your father. He's not coming. He got held up at a committee meeting."

"All right," Rea said. "I'll take the stuff to the dump. It'll take a few runs, but no matter. Why don't you go home and get some sleep?"

"Sleep?" Ida snorted. "I haven't slept for a week."

"Well, go and try. I can manage from here."

Ida smiled and stroked Rea's hand. "You're a good girl."

The closest she'd come to affection in years. Rea leaned in and planted a kiss on her mother's cheek.

“Get off!” Ida swatted her away in mock outrage.

She stood and descended the stairs. At the front door, Ida turned and regarded her dead brother’s life bagged up and ready to be disposed of. She shook her head once, offered Rea a regretful smile, and left.

Rea stayed on the stairs for a time, watching the ripples of sunlight through the door’s stained glass. It wasn’t a bad house, and it was a nice street. A small tingle of excitement in her belly.

A house of her own.

For the last couple of years she’d shared a place with two other women in the Four Winds area, a sprawling suburb to the southeast of the city. The two housemates were younger than Rea, one of them by more than a decade, fresh out of university and working for a legal practice. They made Rea feel older than her thirty-four years. She caught herself wanting to mother them, to scold them for staying out too late, or for the clothes they wore. And she felt they regarded her as a desperate old spinster aunt, constantly trying to set her up with their work colleagues.

Once, she had reluctantly agreed to go on a blind date with one of them. He’d been a pleasant enough gentleman, not bad looking, tidy, polite. When he showed her a photograph of his youngest grandchild, Rea felt like screaming.

Three months had passed since Rea had lost her job. She’d been at the consultancy firm in the city center for almost six years, specializing in recruitment processes, devising interview strategies and aptitude tests. A good salary, too, enough for her to save a decent amount toward a deposit on a house. Since she’d been laid off, the rent on the shared place was eating into her savings, and she had been facing the horrifying prospect of having to move back in with her parents.

Rea suppressed a shudder. Now a lifeline, a chance to have a house without the burden of a mortgage. But could she take a dead man's home? And it needed work. A new kitchen, new central heating, and probably a list of things hidden beneath the surface. Rea knew from her friends' tales of buying houses that the real costs were the hundred secrets the previous owner kept from you. She doubted her savings would cover it.

But still, a house of her own.

She thought of the room upstairs. Her mother was probably right, nothing in there but dust and air. But if she was going to take this place as her own she wanted to see every room, locked or not.

Rea Carlisle decided that before the day was done, she would have the door to the back bedroom opened.

3

Detective Inspector Jack Lennon coughed and wiped his nose with an already damp tissue. The tail end of another cold, his third in as many months. The surgeon had warned Lennon he'd be prone to infections now that he was without a spleen. She'd been right.

His buttocks ached from the thin cushion on the plastic chair, the year-old injuries to his shoulder and side nagging at him. The boardroom's storage heater wheezed and clanked. The yellowed vertical blinds over the windows swayed in the air currents.

The lawyer the Police Federation had retained on his behalf sat across the table, running the tip of a pen down the page, his lips moving as he read. Fluorescent light reflected in bright spots on his scalp. Adrian Orr, his name was, and Lennon had seen far too much of him over the last year.

Orr had made a decent fist of things, but still Lennon found the heat of anger building every time he saw him. He knew he was lucky to have held onto his job this long, that if not for Orr he would have been cut adrift from the force months ago, but still.

For the first few meetings, Lennon had made an effort, tidied himself up, put on a suit. Now he didn't bother. Jeans and a shirt were fine for these dull encounters. He hadn't visited a barber for almost nine months, his dirty-fair hair hanging below his collar

and over his eyes. Grey strands had worked their way in. Susan had given up telling him to get it cut. Besides, his daughter Ellen said she liked it.

"Aren't we done yet?" Lennon asked.

"Mm?" Orr looked up from the page.

"Are we nearly finished?"

"Give me a couple more minutes. Just going over these last few notes from the Ombudsman."

A heavy ache climbed from the back of Lennon's neck into his skull. The back pain would follow soon. He rolled his dry tongue around his mouth, thought of the bottle of water on the passenger seat of his car, and the strip of painkillers in the glovebox. He exhaled, an ostentatious sigh he regretted even before his chest had emptied.

Orr looked up again.

"Please, Jack, settle yourself and let me read. The sooner I get through this the sooner you can go home."

The thought of apologizing flitted through Lennon's mind, but the ugly balloon of pride that remained at his core wouldn't allow it. He shifted in the chair, buttock-to-buttock, then suppressed a grimace at the pain.

Orr set his pen down, folded his hands atop the page, and readied himself to speak as if he were delivering a speech to the Assembly up in Stormont.

"You're not going to get a medical pension, I can tell you that now."

"Fuck," Lennon said.

Orr bristled. "I told you before, Jack, I don't like that kind of language. There's no call for it."

"Yes there bloody is," Lennon said.

“You shot and killed a fellow officer—”

“Who was shooting at me. He’d have killed me and the girl if I hadn’t—”

“You shot a cop.” Orr’s cheeks reddened when he realized his voice had risen to a near shout. He took a breath before continuing. “You helped a murder suspect flee the country. It doesn’t matter what the circumstances were. Gandhi and Mother Teresa couldn’t talk them into giving you a pension now.”

For the last year and three months, the Ombudsman, the Policing Board, and Lennon’s own superiors had been trying to find some way to sweep away the mess he’d made. Three times he’d been up in front of the misconduct panel at the PSNI headquarters on Knock Road, going over the events again and again for the Assistant Chief Constable. Orr and the Police Federation had done their best to fight his corner, but their best had achieved little.

The incident had been over a Ukrainian girl called Galya Petrova. She’d been trafficked in to work in a brothel west of the city, but she’d escaped, killing one of her captors in the process. She wouldn’t have lived another day if Lennon hadn’t got her to the airport that cold morning. She almost didn’t make it. He had taken three bullets for her while she fled.

A young sergeant named Connolly had pulled the trigger after ten thousand pounds had been transferred into his bank account. Lennon had left his colleague’s wife a widow and his twin babies fatherless. He tried not to think about them, reminding himself it was self-defense, but they crept into his consciousness anyway. Every single day.

At first, Lennon had argued that the case also revealed and brought about the capture of a killer named Edwin Payntor.

Surely that counted for something? But Payntor had committed suicide in custody, and the bodies buried in his cellar could never be formally linked to him.

The cache of dirty secrets Lennon kept was the only thing that had saved him from being slung out of the force a year ago. He could avoid formal charges if he accepted demotion and the resulting pay cut, they'd said, and serve out the remainder of his thirty-year contract behind a desk. That way, he could be seen to have been punished for his transgressions, keeping the republican politicians on the Policing Board at bay, but not so severely that it would have the unionists shaking their fists.

But Lennon couldn't afford a drop in his wage. Not now. And he certainly didn't want to spend the best part of the next decade doing paperwork. He'd offered them a choice: give him a medical pension and all the attendant benefits, or fight the case through whatever channels were available. And he'd promised them he'd spill every filthy thing he knew.

Lennon pulled open the driver's door of the eight-year-old Seat Ibiza, slumped down into the seat, and reached for the glovebox. The headache had swollen inside his skull. It pressed behind his eyes, pulsing with his heartbeat, a sickly rhythm he couldn't shake. Not without the pills.

It would be his third dose today, one more than he should have had by this time, but the session with Orr had taken it out of him. No harm in going over his self-imposed limit. Just this once.

As his hand closed on the small box, a voice said, "What happened to the Audi?"

He turned to the still-open door.

Detective Chief Inspector Dan Hewitt, hands in his pockets, his well-pressed suit jacket buttoned. To anyone else in the police station's car park, it would appear he had stopped for a friendly chat with an old colleague. Both Lennon and Hewitt knew different.

"I got rid of it," Lennon said, closing the glovebox.

He could have said it was because he couldn't afford the repairs after it was rammed by an SUV while he tried to get Galya Petrova to safety, that he'd been forced to sell, pay off the remaining balance on the finance, and buy an ageing hatchback instead. But Hewitt already knew all of that. Lennon wouldn't give him the satisfaction of hearing it said out loud.

"Audis are for posers, anyway," Hewitt said. "How've you been? You're still limping a bit."

"I don't limp," Lennon said. "There's nothing wrong with my legs."

The bullet that had passed through his flank, above his hip, and the other wound to his shoulder had left him stiff on that side, taking his balance. His gait was visibly off kilter. But it was not a limp.

"Course not," Hewitt said.

"What do you want?"

"Just to say hello."

"Then say it and fuck off."

Hewitt laughed. "Friendly as ever. You used to be good crack at Garnerville. I don't really know you any more, do I?"

"I could say the same about you."

Hewitt leaned against the car. "You could say a lot of things about me, I suppose."

Lennon watched the other man's eyes. "If I took the notion, yes, I could."

"If you took the notion. But you won't." Hewitt leaned closer. "Will you, Jack?"

"Depends."

"I know you've been snooping around," Hewitt said. "I know you've been digging out old records, making copies. You can't get up to that sort of thing without someone noticing. What are you planning on doing with them?"

"Let's hope you never have to find out."

"I can make things go easier for you," Hewitt said.

Lennon went to pull the door closed, but Hewitt blocked it.

"Or I can make things harder for you. Your choice, Jack."

Lennon looked up at him, asked, "Can you get me out of here with a medical pension?"

"No," Hewitt said, stepping back.

"Then you're no bloody use to me."

Lennon closed the door and put the key in the ignition.

4

The door fitted its frame so tight that when Rea ran her fingertips along the edge she could barely press a nail into the gap. She pushed the door with her palm. No give at all.

Even though she knew it was pointless, she tried the handle. It was a lever type, rather than the knobs on every other door in the house, a keyhole in its plate. Rea knelt down and peered through. Nothing but black.

“Dust and air,” she whispered.

Should she call out the locksmith again? His bill for opening the front door had been steep. Rea thought about her bank account. Could she spare that much? Not if she wanted to pay the rent this month.

The only option was to prise the door open with something. That would damage the frame, and the door, but if she took the house she’d want to change this door anyway. Get one fitted to match the others.

That decided it. She remembered she’d seen an old toolbox in the garage. She went downstairs. The back door that led from the kitchen to the rear garden remained locked with no key to be found, so Rea exited through the front and walked around the house.

Her uncle’s battered car was still parked on the driveway, the

tax and MOT discs in the window months out of date. It would likely have to be towed and scrapped.

The garage stood well back from the road, a rusted metal gate between it and the house. She slid back the bolt on the doors and allowed the light in. She looked around its walls. Asbestos cement. Having it pulled down and replaced would be another expense.

Never mind, she thought, find something to open that bedroom with.

The rusted metal toolbox lay on the floor at the back of the garage, old paint tins stacked on top. Spiderwebs skimmed Rea's skin as she went deeper into the dark. She lifted the first couple of tins from the top of the stack—almost empty, going by their weight—and set them aside.

Rea grabbed the handle of a third and pulled, but its base had been glued to the tin beneath by drying paint, and the remainder of the pile toppled to the floor. She danced back, first to save her toes from the falling tins, then to spare her shoes from the puddle of white emulsion that spread across the concrete.

"Bollocks," Rea said.

The puddle turned to a small lake.

"Shit," Rea said.

She pictured her father seeing the mess, giving her that withering stare, as if he wondered where he'd got a daughter like her from.

"Tits and arse and fuck," Rea said.

No point in worrying about it now. She edged along the rear wall to avoid the paint and hunkered down by the toolbox. Her balance wavered, and she put a hand out to keep from falling into the white puddle. The paint chilled her palm. She cursed again.

With her free hand, Rea pushed the toolbox lid up and back. Inside lay a collection of red-mottled metal and cracked plastic. Pliers and screwdrivers. A socket wrench—what her grandfather used to call a rickety—and a few loose bundles of steel wool. She pushed the smaller tools aside, digging deeper into the box.

Her fingers gripped something harder, colder, more solid. She pulled it, the screwdrivers and pliers clattering aside. It was heavy, a little more than a foot and a half long, curved at each end with fissures in its flattened blades. A crowbar. She had never used one in her life, but it looked like the right tool for the job.

She skirted the paint and headed back outside.

Across the road, a young man in a dark navy suit stood on the garden wall of the house opposite. He smoothed a sticker over the estate agent's sign, covering the words "To Let" with "Let By." He spotted her as she headed for the front door of her uncle's home.

"Excuse me," he called.

Rea paused on the doorstep and looked across.

He waved, hopped down from the wall, and jogged toward her. The garden gate creaked as he let himself through. Even younger than she'd thought, early- to mid-twenties at most. Probably just out of university. He extended his hand as he approached.

"Mark Jarvis," he said. "Mason and Higgs Estate Agents."

Rea showed him her paint-coated palm.

"Ah," he said, lowering his hand. "One of the neighbors told me your bad news. I'm sorry for your trouble."

Rea blinked at him, confused for a moment, before she said, "Oh. Thank you."

She knew what was coming, braced, instructed herself to be polite.

He gave her a broad, deferential smile. "I just wondered if you'd decided what to do with the property yet?"

"Not yet," she said. "Look, I've got a lot to—"

"I understand," he said, holding his hands up. "But I wanted to make you aware that sales are picking up in the area if the houses are priced right, and of course the rental market is very healthy right now."

He waved a hand at the house across the street.

Rea swallowed the urge to swear at him, to slap his smug face. Or to leave a white emulsion handprint on the back of his nice clean suit.

"Thank you," she said, "but this really isn't a good time to—"

"I understand," he said again. "But I just want to make sure you're aware of the services we can offer—"

Before she knew what she was doing, Rea silenced him with her palm pressed against his mouth. He stepped back, white paint dripping from his lips onto his tie.

"I told you it's not a good time." She showed him the crowbar. "Now I'd be obliged if you'd piss off and leave me alone."

He retreated along the garden path, spitting paint, fishing a handkerchief from his pocket. "Sorry for your trouble," he mumbled.

Rea stepped into the house and pushed the front door closed with her hip. She stood there for a time, her back against the wood and glass, cursing herself for being foolish enough to let the little prick annoy her. He was just doing his job, being as pushy as he was trained to be.

"It'll wash off," she said to the empty hall.

Upstairs in the bathroom she ran water over her hand, rubbed her fingers, rinsed as much of the paint away as she could. Still it remained in the creases of her skin and beneath her nails.

“Stupid girl,” she scolded the mirror.

At the age of thirty-four, Rea Carlisle still considered herself a child. While everyone she’d gone to school with seemed to be enjoying glittering careers, beautiful families, or both, she felt for ever stalled in some teenager’s mind.

“Grow up,” she said.

The resonance of her voice in the bathroom unnerved her. She wiped her hands dry on the stained towel and retrieved the crowbar from the floor.

Back out on the landing, the locked bedroom door glowered at her. A hot and bitter swell of anger made her clench her jaw. She’d be damned if a bloody lock would keep her out of a room in what was almost certainly now her own house.

Rea pressed the blade at the straighter end of the crowbar into the gap between the door and its frame, close to the lock. It barely penetrated. She pushed harder, putting her shoulder behind it. The blade went no more than a fraction of an inch deeper. Rea leaned against the crowbar, putting all her weight behind it. She heard a scratching, cracking noise, then felt the crowbar break loose of the door frame, saw the landing carpet coming up at her.

Rea fell hard on her chest, trapping the crowbar between her ribs and the floor. She cried out as the metal jabbed into the flesh beneath her breast. The pain bloomed, and she rolled onto her back, hissing through her teeth. She slipped her hand beneath the fabric of her T-shirt, felt the offended ribcage for blood. Tender, but the skin was unbroken. She breathed in and out, expecting the pain to grow to a shriek as her ribcage expanded. Nothing broken, thank God. She imagined explaining a cracked rib to her father.

“Stupid girl,” she said.

Rea grabbed the crowbar and got back to her feet. She examined the minor damage she’d inflicted on the door frame. Barely a chip on the paintwork, but it was a start.

She returned the crowbar’s blade to the tiny furrow it had dug. This time, she worked the blade back and forth, widening the gap before pushing it deeper. Soon she had forced the crowbar’s tip in by a quarter of an inch. Not too hard. Only a little sweat on her back.

Rea kept working, back and forth, pushing, rewarded by the grinding and cracking. The frame took the brunt of the damage, its wood softer than that of the door. When the blade had dug in almost half an inch, it met something solid. The latch plate, she thought. The crowbar would go no further.

She took her hands away. The crowbar remained suspended, wedged in place. She felt her pulse in her ears. What if she wasn’t strong enough to force the door open?

“Course I am,” she said.

Rea gripped the crowbar, set her feet apart, and pulled. Pressure built inside her head. Her shoulders shook with the effort.

Nothing.

She released the bar and let her hands drop to her sides. A cold line of sweat ran from her temple to her cheek. She gripped the crowbar again and leaned back, pushing with her legs, using the weight of her body.

A hard crack, and the door moved. Only a fraction of an inch, but it moved.

Rea’s breath came in gulps, her heart feeling like it would force its way up her throat.

“This time,” she said, taking hold of the crowbar once more.

She braced one foot against the door frame, planted the other on the floor, and threw her weight back.

Through no will of her own, a growl started deep in her chest and grew to a strained squeal. Christ, I sound like a pig, she thought. A laugh bubbled up from her belly, but before it could escape, the crowbar came loose of the frame and she fell tumbling backward.

The back of Rea's head connected with the wood of the banister and a fierce light flared behind her eyes. The world lurched and shifted. Time creased like folded paper.

Something warm and metallic in her mouth. She swallowed, felt a gnawing pain at the back of her tongue. Bitten it, probably, but she couldn't remember when. How long had passed?

Rea sat upright, rested her shoulders against the banister. She touched her fingertips to the back of her head. Tender, but her scalp was unbroken. A goose egg had already swollen beneath the skin. She turned her head from one side to the other. The muscles in her neck twitched and flickered with pain. Could've been worse, she thought. She'd known a boy at school who'd been left paralysed from the neck down after a simple fall.

What had she been thinking, anyway? She should've waited until her father was there to help. But then, she'd always been like that. Flashes of bravado followed by regret and retreat to her parents' safety net.

All to get a bloody door open.

Then she looked up and saw the empty space where the door had been. And the room beyond, dark as a cave.