

The Sad Man

P. D. Viner

One

Wednesday 13 October 1999

He slides his fingers into his pocket. He feels the thin disc nestled there – a talisman, his good-luck charm. A *ban the bomb* badge – a gift from Dani a lifetime ago. His fingertip finds its sharp pin. He pushes, letting it press deep into the skin until there is a tiny bead of blood. A reminder of actual pain. It is time.

He walks those final steps slowly, with great dignity. At the door he stops for a last-minute inspection of himself. His uniform is immaculate; it is important to show respect. At home he has a full-length mirror. It stands on the floor, allowing him to see exactly how presentable he is, how his uniform fits, the creases, the shine on the buttons, how clean his shoes are – but it does not show his head. He does not like to look at his face in the mirror. He uses an electric shaver, part guess-work and part practice, and every week goes to the barber for a professional shave with a cut-throat razor. That's just how it goes. He looks at his watch, just a few seconds. He never makes a call before 8 a.m. Her name is . . . her name was Chelsea Elizabeth Taylor. She was seventeen years old when she ran away from home a month ago. Now she is dead. He counts down the final few seconds in his head. It is 8 a.m. He reaches for the doorbell. In a few seconds he will rain a plague down on this house. He is the Sad Man.

He touches the small white button. From somewhere a dog barks, low and mean until a whack cuts it short. The door opens. A small face, feral and pinched, looks out and blinks. The skin seems young though you can see where it is dried and cracked, canals are etched

around the eyes and mouth – that is what forty cigarettes a day will do. Forty cigarettes and unimaginable worry. She sees the uniform – looks up into Tom’s face and—

‘Chelsea.’ Her daughter’s name is a wail. A bubble of snot appears, she cracks it with her palm and smears it into her cheek for the torrent of tears to wash away.

‘Can I come inside?’ His voice is so soft it travels less than a yard before it melts into the air. His words are just for her, Chelsea’s mother. She steps back into the shadows and Tom follows down a hallway that stretches like a spine into the centre of the house. Along the walls are photographs of a chubby, happy-looking girl. Tom can see it is Chelsea from the eyes; they are the same deep dark blue he has seen in the SOCO photographs. Except, in the crime scene pictures, Chelsea’s eyes are dead, here on the walls of her family home they are bright and sparkle with life. Her mother leads him into the living room – now more a war room as the clan gathers. The curtains are tightly drawn and the air is a swirl of fog: 90 per cent tobacco smoke and 10 per cent wet dog. Tom peers into the swirling mist and can make out two plants in the corner that look close to death and eight human faces, yellowed and sickly, gathered around a dining table. Sitting on the table before them are a pile of London A-Zs with slips of paper sticking out, each one breaking the city into sections to search, and a box of ‘missing’ posters to be pasted all over town. Too late. Much too late for poor dead Chelsea.

‘I am Detective Sergeant Bevans.’ He pauses, his eyes slowly search out each face in the room and make contact. Human contact. ‘Tom, please call me Tom. I’m what the police call a family liaison officer and . . . I have awful news for you, I am so sorry.’ A tear runs down his cheek. A man moves around the table and envelops Chelsea’s mother in his arms, she folds into him. He is older, maybe her own father. ‘We found Chelsea two hours ago.’ Tom pauses – this is the moment. ‘She is at peace.’

There is nothing. One elephant . . . two elephants . . . three eleph—

‘Did you fucking get him?’ One of the yellow-faced men screams at Tom, pushing his face directly into his so they are nose to nose. Tom almost pulls away – the overpowering stench of cigarettes, stale sweat and despair – but he holds his ground. Tom recognises him from the picture file: Andrew Jenks, Chelsea’s uncle. On another day he might be interested in the man’s assumption it was murder, wonder if it meant something more, but not today. Tom knows his response is not an admission of guilt or hidden knowledge. It just shows that Andrew Jenks is a man who understands how this scenario plays out, who knows how dirty and sordid life can be. Tom sees in his eyes that he knows, or has guessed, where his niece ran to. Mr Jenks is a man who has used prostitutes. He knows how precarious their lives are, what men like him can do to girls like his niece. Tom holds eye contact with the man and then smiles ever so slightly and gently nods his head as if to say: *I understand*. Sheepishly the man pulls his head away and slinks back to the shadows.

‘Was it?’ Another man speaks, this time his voice is fearful. Chelsea’s father. ‘Was it . . .’ He can’t say *murder*.

Tom reaches over and touches the man’s arm. ‘She was . . . attacked. It was very quick.’ Struck over the head while she was on her knees, her skull caved in and pierced her brain. Quick, like a finger click. They do not need to know the details. At least not today. ‘She would have known very little.’

‘She were a good girl.’ The voice comes from the mother, still buried in the older man’s chest. She resurfaces and grabs hold of Tom’s hand. She looks into his eyes, feels kinship there. She can see how much pain he is in, how this news touches him personally – how he cares for them, cares so deeply for them all. She sees the sadness writ large in every line and crease of his face.

‘You will catch him, won’t you?’

He nods gravely. ‘Of course. I promise you and Chelsea.’

She drops her head onto his chest and he puts his arms around her. She weeps tears and mucus all over the front of his uniform.

‘There there.’ He rocks her softly, like a baby. He does not attempt to disengage, but waits for her to stop needing him. After a minute or so, her husband puts his hands on her shoulders and slowly draws her off Tom.

‘Thank you,’ he whispers.

There was tea. There is always tea. Tom drank three cups, each one stronger and more sugary than the last. He sat in an armchair while they crowded onto a sofa. White dog-hair coated everything. He answered their questions slowly and calmly: about seeing the body and making arrangements with funeral directors; about how to talk to the police and what to expect from the press; about paperwork – and, of course, about punishment.

Now he stands on their doorstep once again, yet this time he is walking away. The plague has been delivered. Some families can survive the storm, over time it can bring them closer; give each a greater understanding of the world. The Taylors? More likely, it will devour them, they will become distant, less open with each other and the world in general. Less tolerant, more resentful – less human. That was often the legacy of violent crime.

‘You didn’t tell them the truth, did you?’ He hears her voice in his head: Dani Lancing. She talks to him every day. Questions him, but never really judges him. That’s his job. “‘You will catch him, won’t you?’” She mimics the mother.

‘Dani . . .’ he whispers softly, some pain creeping into his voice. ‘No, I didn’t tell them the truth.’ But he can’t lie to Dani, the woman he has loved his whole life, from the age of five until—

‘Until I died?’

‘That didn’t end it – I still . . .’ He can’t complete the sentence.

‘So what is the truth for them?’

‘The truth?’ Where does he start? How can he talk to a family about their daughter being so far off of society’s radar, sucking men’s cocks on abandoned ground behind King’s Cross station for twenty pounds a go, that she walked like a ghost in the hinterland of society. The police could afford very little protection to someone who chose to shun CCTV, keep to the shadows and have friends who would not speak to the police, not even to help find a killer. She had become expendable: her pimp will just cross her off his list and look for some other vulnerable girl he can use until she is drained or killed or crawls back home. That is the horrible truth and it makes Tom so angry.

‘The system will find her hard to care about. She will not be a priority.’

‘She was just a kid. Seventeen years old. She deserves—’

‘I know. I know, Dani.’ He hangs his head, afraid that this is a case that will either be solved quickly or— He stops that thought. Instead, he takes comfort in the positive side – that the killer is an idiot. He ejaculated in Chelsea’s mouth before he killed her. He cleaned up her face but they have DNA and partial prints. If he is in the database they will get him.

‘You want to avenge them, don’t you?’ Dani whispers. ‘All the pretty dead girls.’

He can't tell if she's mocking him – just a little, perhaps. He probably deserves a little mocking. But she is right. He does want to find the men who hurt them and . . . what? Make it right? Stop another girl meeting the same fate? He isn't sure – he tries to avoid that depth of introspection. What he does know, however, is that being a family liaison officer isn't enough, not anymore. He has been in the police for twelve years – when he joined he had no grand scheme, no career plan. He had acts to atone for – that is why he joined the police. He had hurt someone, a man who had struck at the heart of the girl he loved – had hurt Dani badly. He took the law into his own hands and . . . and afterwards – while he washed the blood away – he found he couldn't take the guilt.

'And then?' Dani asks.

'And then you . . .'

His stomach pitches and he bends forward, his face contorted by the grip of memories: Dani lost somewhere in the shadow of winter, the search for her, the pain and the longing and . . .

'I was found. Dead, lost forever, and you cried and cried till the wind changed and you got stuck like that. Poor Policeman Tom.'

His hair had turned white almost overnight. His face cracked with the grief – like porcelain in a fire – and has remained like that. A perpetual mask of loss – that is why they call him the Sad Man. He remembers it so clearly – that was the first time he became the messenger of death. He had been the one to tell Dani's parents, Patty and Jim, that she was gone, that their child was dead. And now that is his fate: to repeat that awful moment time and time again.

'But you bring so much relief to these families.'

'Because I'm the Sad Man.'

‘They see the pain etched in your face and think it’s for them.’

‘It isn’t.’

‘No. I know that. It’s there for me. For us. For ever.’

He is quiet. He knows he is a good family liaison officer, that he brings calm to those who need it, empathy for those in deep grief. Sometimes he sees something in the eyes of a family member that triggers an alarm. He sees the shadow of guilt. He passes all that on to the DI and a few times, a few times in the last twelve years, it has been his spidey-sense tingling that has led to a killer being convicted. He is proud of that, but it is not enough. He wants to lead an investigation – he wants to find the men who...

Tom pulls back the sheet. Her body was released to the coroner’s office and is now in the morgue. The eyes are closed, he feels a stab of disappointment, he wanted to see the deep deep blue and he cannot find it in himself to open the lids – it would be disrespectful.

‘But she’s dead. The dead can’t be disrespected,’ Dani says.

‘But they can. The dead need our protection too.’ Tom bends forward and leans into the face on the table. He whispers into her ear. ‘Chelsea. We will find him. I swear.’

‘You and your promises,’ Dani-in-his-head almost sings. ‘You can’t keep them all.’

‘I know. I just—’

‘Need to make it personal?’

‘Something like that.’

He rarely sees the body at the crime scene – he is the go-to-FLO after all. Once the victim is identified, he is dispatched to break the news. He hates it. After he has done that he goes to see the body, either at the crime scene if it is still in situ, or here at the morgue.

‘Gruesome!’

He ignores her. He needs to see the body, to make a link with the dead and—

‘You promise them, promise they will be avenged. At least the girls. Girls like me.’

And he tries to keep his promises. He works all hours, chases down reports and interviews family, friends, neighbours – everyone. He drives himself hard and chips and chips away until he finds something in the family, if there is something. But he only gets to see his part of the operation, a jigsaw with half the pieces missing.

‘But the team finds the killer.’

‘Yes, mostly. In most cases we do find the killer – because most murders are stupid and most killers are idiots. Men who still have temper tantrums like toddlers, or think they own anything they can see, anything they can take with force. Most killings happen in plain sight, are witnessed or are telegraphed ahead. Or forensic evidence by the bucketload is left for us to find. They might as well be signed and addressed.’

‘And if not? If it is not run of the mill, if the killer is not stupid?’ she asks.

He sighs so deeply. ‘You know the answer, Dani.’

‘She might become lost. Just like me,’ Dani says in his head.

‘Just like . . .’ For the second time that day a tear runs down his cheek.

Two

Wednesday 13 October 1999

It is late afternoon by the time Tom walks into the CID office at Greenwich. It is a large room, a hub of desks in the middle crowded together like an open-plan bazaar. There are free-standing white boards and flip charts scattered through the melee and one wall is filled with Post-it notes and pieces of paper tacked onto cork boards. The other three walls have had dividers put in to create small offices. Some are for senior officers, others are for private meetings, though the serious interviews take place one floor up, where there are secure rooms.

Tom navigates his way through the jumble of desks. A few heads turn as he passes, there are a few little laughs – Chelsea’s mother has coated his chest in slime and his trousers are covered in dog hair that refuses to be brushed off. He does not acknowledge the sniggers, just keeps his eyes ahead and heads to the small office he shares with three other FLOs. He has a spare uniform in there. He can grab it and head down to shower and change – good as new.

‘New?’ Dani-in-his-head laughs.

He sighs.

He would like it to be all new. Maybe he could start again, have another try at this – at being a grown-up. At thirty-one years old he feels he is still just a boy inside. He is alone – not lonely – just alone most of the time.

‘You’ve got me,’ Dani-in-his-head laughs.

‘And isn’t that a big part of the problem?’

He has tried to make friends. Recently he bought two tickets for the opening day of the Millennium Dome – he is excited to see the technology; there might be jet packs. He bought two so he could offer one to another officer – but so far he’s asked four other sergeants and they all laughed. No one wants to go with him. He even tried speed dating a few months ago, but the only woman who was remotely interested had a love of Phil Collins and turned out to be a creationist. He couldn’t cope with both genesis and Genesis.

‘Bevans. Boss wants to see you.’ A voice comes from the other side of the room.

Tom doesn’t look up – eyes ahead, he is almost at his office door.

‘Now, Bevans.’

‘I really need—’

‘Now.’

Tom stops and looks over. DI Bennett taps his watch and rolls his arm to show the urgency.

‘Okay.’ Tom turns and heads to the unit officer’s room – the hated DI Ashe.

‘Not the guvnor, Ashe’s not here. The boss.’ Bennett calls and points to the stairs. One floor up to Chief Superintendent Drake. Tom looks down at his uniform.

‘You look a right sodding mess.’ Drake opens a drawer and throws him a packet of baby wet-wipes. Tom sponges the worst of the snot away while Drake watches him from behind his antique oak desk. No other office in the building has a wooden desk, the others are metal and

grained plastic that does a very poor imitation of wood. Drake had his own desk brought in from home, it was meant to intimidate. Tom thinks it just makes him look like a show-off.

‘I apologise,’ he says as he wipes. ‘I was with a family this morning. Sir.’

The *sir* is an afterthought. Tom has little respect for the man sitting before him – he is a *political* policeman. He plays golf with the mayor and hosts charity events for the local MP’s wife. He surrounds himself with policeman who think like he does and who don’t rock the boat. Tom hands back the wipes. They go back into the drawer. Tom looks at Drake’s uniform, crisp and clean. His hair, cut army-short, is like steel wool filed down. His cheeks and chin look polished. If Tom felt his own he would feel stubble; even ten minutes after shaving he feels stubble.

Drake sneers a little. ‘That’s a bit better, I suppose. Sit down, Sergeant.’

‘Sir.’ Tom sits, one leg crossed over the other. As he does so he sees he has mismatched socks. He uncrosses them quickly.

‘I’ll get straight to the point,’ Drake starts, looking down at a pile of notes on his desk. ‘You passed both parts of your DI exam – the law part you’ve had for . . .’

‘Three years.’

‘And you passed the practical and field assessment six months ago.’

‘Yes.’ Tom’s face clouds over.

‘You applied immediately for promotion to detective inspector?’

‘Yes.’

Drake smiles his snake charmer's smile. 'DI Ashe and myself have turned down your application.'

'Three times.'

'Three times exactly. Do you know why?'

'No, sir.'

'How did that make you feel?'

'I don't underst—'

'Bollocks, Bevans. You pass both parts of the exam, the law section with the highest score this department has ever gained. You should have got automatic promotion, but you didn't. Doesn't that make your blood boil?'

'No.'

Drake looks at him for a few seconds, clearly trying to gauge what lies behind the mask.

'Sad Man? That's what they call you isn't it?'

He sighs a little. 'Yes, sir.'

'You lost your childhood sweetheart – murdered, wasn't she?'

'Childhood sweetheart?' Dani-in-his-head laughs.

'Yes.' Tom fights to keep his voice neutral, controlled. He can feel the tears start to form. *Breathe*. He does not want to cry in front of a senior officer. 'She was abducted and murdered.'

‘So you dedicate your life to help other victims like her?’

‘Nothing like that, I had chosen the police force bef—’

‘Do you have outside interests, Bevans? Outside the force, I mean.’

‘I don’t see the relevance.’

‘I play golf. I used to do battle re-enactments, Wars of the Roses was my favourite. I was Warwick, the Kingmaker. Military history serves the modern policeman well – you should remember that.’

‘I will, sir.’ He won’t.

‘DI Ashe recommended you be kept as a sergeant for two reasons. The first: because he felt you were the best family liaison officer he has ever seen – and I agreed with him.’

‘The second?’ Tom asks, his throat tight with a growing resentment.

‘He said that you had little ability to lead a team, that you were an outsider, that the empathy you seemed to show by the bucketful to the families, even scumbags, was totally lacking towards your fellow officers. Does that seem like a fair assessment?’

‘I . . .’

‘Maybe a bit unfair, let me turn the question around. DI Ashe – what do you think about him as a leader of men?’

Tom considers this for a second. ‘I think he fosters a familiarity, a camaraderie within his team. Most of the team are loyal to him.’ Tom also knows DI Ashe likes to frequent strip clubs and get hand-jobs from teenage prostitutes in return for not arresting them. He says nothing of that.

‘Familiarity. That’s a strange word to use, Sergeant Bevans.’ Drake drums his fingers on the desk. ‘I’d say he builds a team – I would also say that loyalty is bloody important.’

Tom feels his jaw tighten. He doesn’t believe you build loyalty by going to the pub: leadership is not the same as being liked. ‘I appreciate DI Ashe’s qualities of leadership, Ch—’

‘Liar. I can see it in your face. You don’t rate Ashe as a DI. And it’s mutual.’

‘Sir.’ It creeps like a condemnation from Tom’s mouth.

‘Bloody hell, Bevans, you’re an excellent family officer, a seriously good evidence analyst, a ferret up a drainpipe where it comes to finding the flaws in some bastard’s alibi – but a fucking liability as a senior copper.’

‘I think you’ll find—’

‘Lia-fucking-bility. Bevans, you are not the sort of man I trust at the top level. Do you know what it means to lead men? Do you have any idea what you need to do to be a DI, let alone run a CID team? Run a unit without enough people or resources – where half of the staff are depressed and the other half are too stupid to know they should be? Where you see guilty men – men you know are villains – walk free every day because you can’t make something stick? Where colleagues hate each other or are fucking each other, or both? Where every day is a juggling act and there is pressure from the top to catch more villains – and to do it more cheaply, more quickly? A good copper these days isn’t Sherlock-fucking-Holmes. He’s an accountant, a ringmaster and an organiser. And he has to know when to lick arse and when to stick the knife in.’

Tom stays silent but his jaw clamps tight.

‘And you know what I think of you? I think you’re a bleeding heart in a uniform. You think a copper is some kind of superhero or a knight on a fucking white charger. You are an idealist. I hate idealists. They’re messy.’

‘White knight? Oh, he doesn’t know you very well, does he?’ Dani-in-his-head whispers.

Tom feels battered. He should resign here and now, he could—

‘But needs must and you’re the best I’ve got. I want you to go home, get some sleep and be here at the crack of dawn. You’ll be acting DI.’

‘What?’

‘What part didn’t you understand, lad? Ashe isn’t here, Bennett is an idiot and maybe you can make the grade. Maybe, I’m not sure.’

‘Sir, I will—’

‘I’ll do the paperwork now; you’ll get the pips in a few days. It’s no more money and longer hours – none of which you will get as overtime, not any more. You will coordinate blue team and report directly to me. No Miss Marple shit like hunches or clues. You and all your team goes by the book: tag and bag evidence; chase down alibis; check friends, family and neighbours. Good and proper policing and we clean ’em up or hang ’em out to dry. At 9 a.m. tomorrow I will introduce you to the floor as acting DI. You need to be aware that DI Bennett will fucking hate you—’

‘He does already.’

‘No difference, then. Go home, get some sleep – because you won’t get any more for the next month – and be back here in the morning. Congratulations, acting DI Bevans.’ They stand and shake hands. The older man’s hand is weak. Tom grips it firmly and nods slowly.

‘What’s wrong with DI Ashe, sir?’

‘Bloody idiot fell down the stairs. Probably pissed, and he broke his – oh, I can’t say it without laughing. The bottom of his spine.’

‘Coccyx?’

Chief Superintendent Drake sniggers like a schoolboy. ‘Coccyx – yeah.’

Three

Wednesday 13 October 1999

On the way home Tom buys a portion of chips and a giant pickled onion. Cliché. The single cop who eats take-away every night in front of the TV. At home he goes to the kitchen and pulls out a wok, drizzles in some sesame oil and fish sauce and throws in onions, mushrooms, chillies and some strips of chicken. A few minutes on a high heat, then he throws the chips in with some soy sauce, lemongrass and ginger. At the last moment he stirs in fresh coriander. The pickled onion is the salad.

His dining table is red and white squared Formica – it was his nan's. It has two hinged leaves that can be raised to make a table for four, six at a squeeze. Otherwise it seats two and the leaves bang against your knees. There is a gouge in it where his dad stuck a carving knife in one day. His dad had been holding Tom's head down on the table at the time, the knife stabbed the Formica close to his nose. His dad was drunk. Incredibly contrite the next morning, of course. Tom loves the table. He pours himself a glass of fizzy water (pauper's champagne) and eats his fine-dining take-away. He uses chopsticks, practising for the big holiday he plans to take in China. Someday. Across from him is a second placemat and pair of chopsticks. Stupid.

'I'd rather have a fork,' Dani-in-his-head tells him.

It was something he had done years before: laid her a place at the table, generally on holidays – Christmas and her birthday, always St Valentine's Day and on the anniversary of her death. This year it had been ten years: 7 February 1989. That was the day her body had been found. On the tenth anniversary he had taken a day's leave and done a tour – a ghost

walk – of all the spots that had been special to them. He walked through Greenwich Park and up to the Observatory. He found their tree and traced their initials in the wood for the thousandth time, sixteen years since they carved them. He walked over to the old school – he almost went in but stopped himself. He watched through the gates, saw the playground – all so different. Then he went to her house. The Lancing’s family home. He knocked on the door and Jim, her father, opened it. He looked older, especially around the eyes. Tears will do that to you. But when he saw Tom he smiled that old smile and it felt like . . . home.

Together the two of them went to the garden of remembrance and sat with her. Dani’s two men. Jim took yellow roses, like every year, and Tom read from Keats. Then they went for a curry and Jim told Tom about being alone – totally alone since his wife Patty had left him. More damage from Dani’s murder. It had just taken longer for the wound in his marriage to bleed away the last traces of love and hope. He had lost both of his women. Dani and Patty. There, much to the embarrassment of the Indian waiters, both men wept. Neither admitted to the other that they spoke to Dani every day. That night Tom laid his nan’s Formica table for two, the first time he had done it in three or four years. It made him feel close to her again, so he has done it every night since. Maybe when the new millennium rolls on he will change. Put away the things of the past and move on. Perhaps. He takes a book, the cover says: *Private. Do not read.* He opens it on the table next to him as he eats. He reads:

Monday 14 June 1982

I flew. 800M champion and school record. They are going to check and see if it is a county record too. It was amazing, I left everyone for dead. After there was a party in Islington. I knew Dad was going to the race and was going to give me a lift home, but I couldn’t go – not after the buzz of winning. It was cool, he understands. I don’t think he’ll tell Mum, at least

not for a week and then it'll be all just a memory. The party was good – the muscle boys and jocks couldn't do enough for me. I know what they want – and they might get a little something – but I'm not stupid. There was something strange though. Tom Bevans turned up – all pale and thin with those piercing eyes. I know Izzy thinks a lot of him but I'm not sure, he is too intense and all that romantic poet shit is a bit much. But he had come to tell me Dad was worried about me. It was nice of him . . . I think. We danced, him and Izzy and me. It was Siouxsie and the Banshees – 'Spellbound'. He had some good moves. I love Siouxsie Sioux. If I had to do a girl it would be her.

Tom opens up his DI's handbook to read-up on the responsibilities of being a detective inspector. This is his dream. He feels so proud, suddenly he wants to tell someone – but who? The only person he can think of to call is Jim. His almost dad, but really? Really?

'Why no one else? Why no other girl?' Dani asks.

There had been a few girls – most of them one-night stands. The one-night stands were girls who looked like Dani. The few others . . .

'They never made the grade did they?' Danni-in-his-head asks. 'Couldn't compare.'

No. No they couldn't. The one who almost did was Jane. She was blond, tiny – worked at an art supplier. She painted. It lasted six months. She hadn't realised for the longest time. Everyone closes their eyes when they kiss, don't they, but in bed he closed his eyes as they made love. Even in the dark.

'Look at me,' she asked. 'Look at me,' she pleaded. 'Look at me,' she begged. 'Look at me,' she demanded. But he couldn't – in his mind he was making love to Dani. 'Look at me leave,' she finally said, tearfully, as she left.

‘Was I good?’ Dani asks. He is quiet. He doesn’t call Jim.

It is 1.25 a.m.

‘Oh . . . fuck.’

From somewhere far off there is a giggle. Tom pulls the duvet from himself and strips off his pyjamas. They are sticky. There are fleeting images of Dani and Siouxsie Sioux naked.

‘Jesus Christ.’

A wet dream. He feels like a boy, yet he is supposed to be a man. *A fucking liability* echoes through his head. He goes to the shower and stands until the hot water runs out and then he stands some more in the freezing torrent.

He makes strong coffee, pouring it into his *World’s Greatest Dad* mug. At 4 a.m. the phone rings.

‘We have a positive match for the DNA in Chelsea Taylor’s mouth.’ Sergeant Patterson tells him.

‘That is fantastic. Anybody she knew?’

‘No. Some shoe salesman from Bristol. We’re gonna get the locals to pick him up in an hour.’

Tom’s relieved her poor mother has nothing else to mourn, he had feared she would have the added trauma of someone she knew being arrested for the crime.

‘Get Bristol to check their dead list, see if he’s done the same to any girls there.’

‘On it.’

‘So why did you call?’

‘You’re the boss.’

Tom looks at his watch. He is the boss now.

‘So?’

‘Something came in. Something really weird.’

Four

Thursday 14 October 1999

‘Are you ready?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘You have waited a long time.’

‘Yes.’

‘Ever since you saw me.’

‘Ever since.’

‘I was your first.’

‘You were my first in so many ways.’

‘You loved me?’

‘You know I did, from the age of five.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’

‘That I was your first. Your first dead girl.’

‘Oh, Dani.’

5 a.m. Everything moves in slow motion as he walks inside. His brain is in overdrive, trying to see every single thing. It is an art gallery, a huge space. Almost one complete wall – the showroom window – is glass, but a screen has been stretched across so no one can look in from the street. Tom doesn't know if that was there already or if his men arranged it. One wall is uncovered red brick, the other two have been plastered and painted white. A lighting grid hangs down from a third of the ceiling and other lights extend from the walls like tendrils. It is very modern. The floor is wood. There is a staircase in one corner that leads to some kind of mezzanine or loft space. It is a magnificent room, perfect for art. A space to show off one's creativity, one's élan . . . the hair at the back of Tom's neck stands to attention. This is already feeling bad; this is no Chelsea Taylor. This is no idiot leaving his DNA, the equivalent of a signed confession. This is a showman's murder.

Tom stands in the doorway, drinking in the view – first impressions are important. He will never get to do this again, never walk into his first crime scene as the boss. He needs to get this right. He breathes deep and walks forwards, his brain logging the position of every article in the room – the textures of the walls and floors, colours and shapes – each and every sensation bombards his brain as synapses flare and explode. He is a camera, a recorder, a human computer, and an analyst. Patterson is there to greet him, he holds out a bag. Tom takes it and snaps latex gloves onto his hands, puts something like a shower cap over his head and bags onto his shoes.

The body is in the centre of the room. Tom has no measuring tape but he reckons it is dead bang in the middle. He will ask someone to check – it is no coincidence. He looks up, there is a skylight directly above the body. Perhaps the position has been chosen so the killer can see the moon. Too early to speculate. *Don't try too hard, Tom*, he tells himself.

The SOCO team have cleared a path, an indirect line to the body. The least likely to contain forensic evidence – that is the way they approach the victim and to get to her they first search it inch by inch. He follows that same path. There is the tang of vomit in the air, courtesy of the first policeman on the scene, who is now sitting in a car with a bottle of water, his uniform speckled with flecks of his dinner from last night. The vomit has been covered with a bucket, but it's still there – can't be cleaned up, not yet, the room is a crime scene. Tom finally reaches her, as if he has fought his way through a labyrinth or descended into hell to reach Persephone. Her eyes are open – they are the most incredible colour, almost golden.

'Dark they were and golden eyed,' Tom whispers to himself.

'Were my eyes open?' Dani asks.

'No. No, you could have been asleep.'

She is young, twenty-ish. Her hair is white – no, silver, and it is obviously dyed but high-quality professional work. No roots – it looks like silver leaf. She is the most striking woman he has ever seen, not beautiful, he doesn't think that but striking. Head-turning. Her skin is pale, her mouth incredibly full – she looks about five foot ten inches tall. She is slim – salad and workout slim, toned. Catwalk model is his first thought: *shit!* He hopes she isn't famous. He can do without that kind of pressure on his first case in charge.

'Any ID?' Tom calls out to anyone around.

'Nothing yet. No bag, no coat. No phone,' someone answers, Tom doesn't know who. His eyes are still latched onto the girl's.

She is naked. He would describe her skin as alabaster. There is no bruising and only one wound. It killed her, Tom knows that, even without a coroner's report. She has been cut.

An incredibly sharp blade, possibly a scalpel, has sliced her belly – Davy Jones’ locker deep – and she has bled dry. But none of the blood is on her skin – he doesn’t understand. The blood has pooled around her, beneath her, but Sergeant Patterson was right. It is weird. He looks lower. She is shaved between her legs and . . . Tom moves his eyes back up her body. He hopes she can be covered soon. It is unbearably undignified.

‘Sir.’ Patterson stands beside him.

‘I see what you mean.’

‘Wait . . . you need to go up the stairs.’

Tom follows Patterson’s finger and sees a wooden staircase that leads to a loft-area that covers approximately half of the total room. He nods and follows the SOCO labyrinth back out to the main part of the room and he heads to the staircase. Without looking back he climbs to the top, then swings around and—

‘Christ.’

The blood is not merely a pool around the body – it makes a shape.

‘Are they wings?’ Dani-in-his-head asks.

‘I don’t know, but . . .’ It is not a natural pattern, it’s clearly a man-made construct. All acting DI Tom Bevans can do is stand there and feel very very scared.

He walks to the thin rail that runs around the edge of the loft. He calls out to the entire room: ‘Listen to me. I don’t want to read about any weirdness in the newspapers tomorrow. No butterfly wing killer, no platinum-blonde killed. We answer any question like we would normally: the bare minimum. If I see crucial facts leaked I will call in internal affairs and they

will find who did it and make an example of them. Don't think because this is my first case you can push me. Okay. Patterson get up here.'

He slowly climbs the stairs. Tom can't tell if he is tired or already fed-up with his new boss.

'We need to know who this girl is, we need a name quickly. We also need to check with every other force – have they seen anything like this before. Check with Interpol too, and the FBI. Ask them to look for silver- or platinum-blondes, the belly sliced open and—'

'The wings?'

Tom nods. 'Wings.'

Around him there are five or six of the SOCO team, looking like spacemen in their non-contamination suits. They gather evidence, bag and tag any hair, fabric, dust – anything they find. That is police work: collecting and analysing. The more anal you are, the better you were at a crime scene. Then, around the edges of the room, there are another seven or eight uniformed men and women – all on phones – calling other units and other police forces; checking and cross-checking for any similar crimes or reports of violence. Outside the crime scene, another six officers are going door to door, taking statements and ascertaining alibis. All of this is to be recorded, all tested to see if it holds water. Any slight crack will be stretched and pulled apart. This is modern policing. And at the top of the pyramid is Tom. The thought makes him a little light-headed and he has thought he should just shout stop! This must be a joke – this isn't a case, it's an episode of *The X Files*. It isn't real life.

It is five hours before the SOCOs are ready to remove the body. 10 a.m. All that time Tom waits, watching her eyes and tracing the pattern of blood that emanates from her belly. He takes a sketch pad from someone and draws the pattern – but he hasn't quite got it until

the body is removed. The girl was placed on fibreglass rests to raise her from the floor. They fit perfectly and must have been made for the purpose. That allowed the blood to drain from the body and accounts for why there is none on her. The SOCO team had to bring in a small crane to lift the body and leave the fibreglass in place. Once she was gone they could see how the killer had created a pattern in the floor.

‘I think it’s a lark’s head knot,’ the SOCO team leader tells Tom.

‘How do you know?’

‘Cubs, scouts and sea cadets. I had two badges for knots.’

‘How did he do it?’

‘The shape was carved into the wooden floor. He – assuming it was a he – was very careful and incredibly precise. This isn’t some weekend DIY guy; he must have had a specialist tool, probably a rounded sculpting knife, and a steady and practised hand. It’s a tongue-and-groove floor but whenever he crosses a board he has used some sort of sealant to make sure the groove doesn’t bleed . . .’ He stops, realising how inappropriate that word is.

‘So he carves the shape of a knot into the floor?’ Tom asks. ‘That must have taken bloody ages?’

‘No idea.’

‘Then he places fibreglass . . . what – legs, rests – some kind of support under her body to hold it off the floor?’

‘Pretty much. Again, it looks like they were made for the purpose. There are six in all. One is moulded to hold the head, another to the lower back, then both arms and legs. The killer screwed them into the floor and then coated them in sealan—’

‘What, hang on. He must have set this up a long time before he killed her. How long would that sealant take to dry?’

‘Not sure, at least a couple of hours. Maybe a lot longer.’

‘So the killer knew her, prepared for her specifically – knew how tall she was and her body shape. He had the fibreglass made to her dimensions – this was planned at least days in advance and possibly longer.’

‘Probably.’

‘Thanks. Good work.’

Tom strides away from the SOCO leader and finds Patterson.

‘It’s likely the killer knew her. We need a name so we can check to see if she’d reported anything – a stalker, being followed, anything like that. Also to see if she had disgruntled boyfriends, or had separated from someone recently.’

‘Sorry, no name yet.’

‘Push harder. Get photos out there, every force here and in Europe. If nothing comes in the next two hours I want her picture released to the press.’

‘Guv, you can’t.’

‘I can and will.’

Tom walks away. He is almost back at the body before he realises Patterson called him Guv. It makes him want to cry – he is so happy.

‘Get a grip, Sad Boy,’ Danni whispers.

A SOCO photographer is capturing images of the lark's knot from every angle. With the body gone to the morgue, Tom can see the intricacy of the work, the beauty of the interlacing strands. He forgets for a moment it is blood – it is so artistic.

'Excuse me.' The photographer breaks the moment and Tom is back in the land of the living. He steps away and lets the team do their jobs. He watches them and lets his mind float – time seems to slow around him. Did the killer break into the gallery and prepare the scene – or was she held while he carved the floor? If so, where did he put her while he did this? What triggered this? Was it a need to kill, or was it a desire to kill her specifically? If so, how did he select her, or was she chosen because of this place, this gallery? A showplace for his craft?

Just then he hears a raised voice at the doorway. Someone demanding to know what is going on – the owner of the gallery has arrived. Tom walks over to the door to the street and dips under the curtain the SOCO team have put up. Outside the air is chill. Tom picks out the gallery owner immediately: Valerie Brindley-Black. She is tall, in her mid-fifties, elegant and beautiful. Tom doesn't need to show her the picture – he knows the dead girl is her daughter. A tear slips from his eye as he walks to her.

'I am in charge here. Detective Inspector Tom Bevans.'

She stretches out her hand to him – efficient and businesslike. He takes it and covers it with his other hand. He holds on tight for a bumpy ride.

He still holds her hand. It is an hour since he first took it and he has not let go. He held it while he asked if she had a daughter. He held it while he explained a murder had been committed in her gallery and he held it while she began to panic about Charlie, who had been meeting a client there yesterday morning. He held her hand while she described Charlie and

he held it while they walked to the police car. He let go just for a moment, and she almost fell. They both climbed into the car and she grabbed it once more – needing the contact, needing the calm this man generated as her heart rate spiked and . . .

. . . they walk into the morgue. Holding hands like young lovers. He feels the vibration in her body – she fizzes with nervous energy. Fear. As they are led into the room, the room with a body covered by a sheet, he feels the nails of her hand bite. Hard and deep. The sheet is gripped and . . . he feels something in his chest shift. A vibration – a song. Dani sings to him. The sheet pulls away and . . .

. . . time folds as she folds, he slips his arm around her, she twists and he takes the weight – a tango of love and loss as he catches her and pulls her to him. She moans, low and guttural. It is a song of grief. He knows it well. He lifts her, she weighs nothing, and carries her away from the room, out into a hallway and others take her. She will help later, answer questions later, but for now she just sings a love song for her poor pale daughter. Charlie . . .

. . . he has a coffee and a bacon sandwich. He tastes nothing: his stomach god needs appeasing but his taste buds have deserted him. There are reports, paperwork to sign and overtime to agree. He looks at his watch: 2.27 p.m. Back to the unit, regroup and be briefed and . . .

‘FUCK! Bevans, you are off this case. You are too inexperienced for this.’

Tom is back inside the chief superintendent’s office. The older man stands at the window watching the world pass by. It is 6 p.m. and the sun is a burning red ball: red sky at night, copper’s delight. Drake’s face is cut into strips by the last of the day’s light that swims through the venetian blinds. Soon it will fall away and be gone.

‘This case is toxic. No one is coming out of this looking good. If I leave you in place the press will hack you to pieces.’

‘Don’t take me off it.’ Tom asks, his voice strong.

Drake shakes his head. Tom can see the tension in his jaw and a wildness in his eye he had not seen before.

‘I can’t afford an inexperienced man at the helm, this could turn into a circus very quickly. We either solve it double quick or we bury it.’

‘I gave the mother my word—’

‘This is not a normal case. Whoever did this wants the press. He’s some clever clever fuck who wants to show us how big his dick is. We do not give it the oxygen of publicity. We’ve got twenty-four hours and then we close it.’

‘And wait for the next woman to die?’

‘And maybe we make him so pissed off that he makes a mistake next time.’

‘I can’t believe th—’

‘Button it, Bevans. This is fucked up and we need to play it smart. We’re used to people knocking off their relatives for an inheritance, or a lover beating their partner to death because they fucked them over. This killer gave us a knot made of blood.’

‘Let me keep the case.’

‘No. I am going to withdraw your status as acting DI. We are going to allocate the case to DI Ashe—’

‘But Ashe isn’t here.’

‘And we still give it to him. That way we can fudge responsibility later, if we get crucified in the newspapers or shat on from above.’

‘Sir, with respect—’ Tom starts but Drake cuts him dead.

‘If a reporter gets hold of this. . .’

‘My head can roll. I mean it.’

‘You’re a fucking idiot, Bevans. I’m giving you a way out. Take it.’

Tom cannot see himself going back to being a FLO. After one day he knows this is what he was meant to do. ‘Please, leave me on the case.’ Tom pauses, he rolls the dice. ‘I may have something.’

‘On the case?’

‘A line of enquiry.’

‘Well what is it? Out with it, man.’

‘Charlotte Brindley-Black was a brunette who dyed her hair silver. She did it for the first time just days before she was killed.’

Drake stares at him for a few seconds. ‘Are you fucking me?’

‘I think she did it for the killer.’

‘That’s it?’ Chief Superintendent Drake sighs, he looks exasperated. ‘I said no fucking hunches.’

‘Instinct.’

Tom looks into the chief's eyes and holds his gaze. It has withered many DIs in the past but Tom feels strong. In Drake's eyes he thinks he sees something akin to loathing – but there is also a glint there, deep in his eye.

The chief superintendent finally nods. 'Three days. You have three days and then we put this in a landfill.'

'That's all I ask.'

'Okay, Bevans.'

Drake turns back to the window. The red sky has fallen away and man-made light illuminates the city now. Tom watches him staring out at the city, there is no goodbye. He is merely meant to melt away from his senior officer's presence. He turns to leave and slips out of the door. He imagines Chief Superintendent Drake will heave a huge sigh of relief now. If the case falls apart he will have a fall guy. He can feed Tom Bevans to the wolves.

Five

Friday 15 October 1999

12.01 a.m. Tom has spread page after page of drawings across the dining table. Knots – specifically the lark’s head, otherwise known as the cow hitch. It is around two thousand years old. It is the perfect knot for attaching an article to a pole or tying down furniture to transport. He knows all this because he stopped in on a neighbour before coming home, a local bore who runs a second-hand bookshop. A man Tom would normally avoid, but who opened up the store for him and – bingo! He had two books on tying knots, hence all the history. For the last four hours Tom has been reading about the knot, tying them, sketching them and searching databases for any sexual meaning or reference. It has certainly passed the time, but he still has no idea why the killer carved a knot of blood into the floor.

‘Maybe it’s a red herring. A McGuffin,’ Dani-in-his-head suggests.

‘This is real life not the movies. No, it must mean something. It must give him something.’

‘You’re sure it’s a him?’

‘Oh yes. This is the work of a peacock. It’s showy.’

‘This is no peahen?’

‘No.’ He yawns.

‘You need some sleep,’ she says softly.

‘Probably.’

‘I could sing you a lullaby?’

‘I would like that.’

‘Good.’

He lies in bed and watches shadows slide and storm on the ceiling above him. He leaves his curtains open – has done for most of his adult life. He likes to be woken by the daylight and some mornings he wakes before dawn and walks into Greenwich Park to see the new day begin. On other occasions he has spent all night in the park, in a sleeping bag to wake with the dawn. It is a little rite he began many years ago, for Dani. And he still does it sometimes. To remember her.

‘You will never forget me,’ she whispers.

‘No. Never.’

He lies awake and thinks about the ride in the car to the morgue with Valerie Brindley-Black. He has arranged to see her tomorrow afternoon, to interview her formally but—

‘Her brain will be fried,’ Dani laughs. ‘They are gonna sedate her up the wazoo and back.’

He knows she’s right. Valerie Brindley-Black wasn’t going to be able to help now, not for days, maybe weeks. But in the car today, before she saw her daughter’s body and still held out hope, she said a number of things that Tom cannot forget. He keeps turning them over in his mind.

She looks as if she has aged a decade in ten minutes. Her hand in his feels like a small bird, heart racing and delicate bones that can fold and snap in an instant – just the lightest of pressure. She looks out through the side window as life whooshes by. Tom can see what she’s thinking, as if it’s written on the glass: *Please let my daughter’s life not have rocketed to the end.*

‘When did you last see your daughter?’

‘Tuesday afternoon – near the end of the day. I was away all yesterday seeing an artist – sound sculptures. He records elderly dentists. He lives in York, I took the train.’

‘Had you planned it a while in advance?’

‘Weeks ago.’

‘And what was Charlie doing?’

‘We’re between shows. The last pieces were removed at the weekend, so she was getting the room ready for the next show – they are due in . . . Christ, I need to cancel them.’

Tom sees the darkness wash over her.

‘Can you describe Charlie?’

She is mute for a second. Her eyes are unfocused, a little wild. She stares out of the window, watching a bakery open its doors and the owner fight with a stubborn awning. Tom watches her face as fear and anger brawl beneath her skin. He is reminded of a blind woman, the grandmother of a girl who was killed. He called on the family to give them the news that she had been found, and the old woman felt his face, demanding to discover who the man was that brought such dreadful news to her family. Tom allowed her. Part of him was interested in what she would find, if she could unravel the mystery of his soul. He sat on their

sofa while the entire family pressed around them and this old woman who was blind from birth, ran her fingertips across the terrain of his face. As she did, her face clouded over. She did not understand, was lost in the lines of grief. What other people might call laugh lines, on Tom they were scream lines. She pulled her fingers away as if they burned. She said one word, *Methuselah*, then left. Tom thinks Valerie Brindley-Black's face would elicit the same response.

'She lights up the room, any room she enters,' Valerie finally says of her daughter. She talks of her in the present tense. Tom can see how desperate she is to cling onto a daughter who still breathes. 'She is graceful and . . . she makes people feel special.'

'Are there siblings?'

For a second it looks as if she will break down – but she pulls herself back from the edge and regains control. 'I . . . we lost three. Late miscarriages, all of them. Finally there was Charlotte.' An unseen memory picks her up and tosses her around, she hums to herself. Tom waits again, for her to come back.

'Charlie's father?'

'Cancer.' She sighs the word away like someone who has nursed the dying.

'I'm sorry.' And he is.

'Charlie was five. We went to live with my younger—' A flash of pain. 'My sister Sophie who had two daughters, one a bit younger than Charlie, and the other a little bit older. They lived by the sea and . . . it was a good time. We healed.'

Tom nods, though he really isn't sure he fully understands how people heal from such loss. He has heard people say that *time heals all wounds* but surely that is untrue. Ten years after Dani's death he still feels the pain as if it were fresh.

'When did you open the gallery?' he asks.

'Four years ago, when Charlie went to art school. It was always agreed that when she finished her studies she'd come and we would work together. We are very close.'

Tom looks past her for a second, he can see that they are close to their destination, his time with her has almost run dry. The morgue is only a few minutes away. If he is going to get anything of use, then it has to be now.

'Can you describe her to me? Physically, I mean.'

Her hand starts to shake, he squeezes it. 'She is tall, like me – we are very much alike in shape and size. We often wear each other's clothes – though I try not to dress like a young woman.' She pauses, remembering something she will not share. 'She is beautiful. Her eyes are light brown, honey, I always think.'

Gold, Tom thought.

'With long beautiful hair, she shapes it a little at the end and it sculpts her face. It has flecks of the same light honey but is mostly like muscovado sugar.'

'It's brown?' Tom feels light-headed – it wasn't her daughter. This lovely sad woman isn't going to be in mourning for the rest of her life. He feels his heart soar and hi—

'No. I was forgetting.' She looks so old now. 'She had it cut and dyed. Silver. Of all things. I hated it. Absolutely hated it – we had a fight. A big fight. The first ever. I—'

'She liked it, her new hair?' he asks, feeling his heart harden once more.

‘She loved it, seemed incredibly excited by it.’

‘Did she tell you why she chose to do it?’

‘She said . . . she said she had to.’

‘She was forced?’

‘Nothing and no one could force my daughter to do anything. And she didn’t say it with regret. In fact, she seemed very excited by it. Even though she could plainly see it distressed me.’

The car stops. Valerie grips the door handle tightly. Tom understands: she doesn’t want to get out of the car – if she stays there she keeps her daughter alive. They both know who they will find in the morgue.

‘Take your time.’ Tom releases her hand and slides from the car. He stands in the car park in the cold and thinks about silver hair. After five minutes Valerie joins him.

‘Do you have a cigarette?’ she asks. He shakes his head. ‘I haven’t smoked for seventeen years. I thought I might like one.’ She releases a sad little laugh.’

‘Would you like me to find a colleague who—’

‘No. Just a passing fancy. Not necessary.’

She reaches out and takes his hand once more. She even smiles. Together they walk into the building. They begin in the entrance hall. Tom feels her tense next to him and slide behind him as a shield. There is a drone of noise and from all sides people sweep around them – there are people using crutches everywhere. Tom is reminded of the bazaars of Istanbul, or the markets of Calcutta. All human life is here. He raises an arm to protect her and they push forward, to journey to the underworld. They move slowly, from one half-lit

NHS corridor to another, together; in unison with their footfalls perfectly synchronised. Finally they arrive at a lift which takes them down, down into the Victorian belly of the hospital. Strip lighting makes them look green. There are a final two winding corridors, and then they reach the morgue. Inside, steel gleams and hearts are in mouths. Valerie Brindley-Black holds tighter and tighter to his hand as a viewing room is made ready. Tom knows what is in her mind: 'Please, please let it be anyone but her.' A sheet is all there is to cover the dead face and that is slowly pulled aside. Tom feels the hand soften, he holds on tight but the woman next to him is gone.

Six

Friday 15 October 1999

The alarm sounds at 5.30 a.m. After a minute or two there is a banging on the wall and a muffled cry.

‘Turn it off.’

The alarm sounds for ten minutes before the internal program kicks in and it is silent. Tom is already at the office, has been there since 3.45 a.m. He had four officers collating all potential cases with similarities – there are dozens of them – and he is going through the files one by one. Most of them are a waste of time – the computer has flagged up *silver-blond hair* and *knots* but Tom can see in an instant there is no connection.

‘Frustrated?’ Dani-in-his-head asks him after a third triple espresso ordered in from the all-night Italian.

‘The problem is that police officers have no poetry in their souls.’

‘Come again?’ she laughs.

‘This was crafted, performance art. It was for show but it also served a purpose. It repeated something or brought clarity to something in the killer’s past.’

‘Oh, get you, Sigmund!’

‘But it’s true. This is something that is meaningful for the killer and we have to sift through all the static to find what that is. He chose a shape – it isn’t coincidence that it’s a lark’s head.’

‘AKA a cow’s hitch.’

‘Fine. And the hair.’

‘She may have just chosen to go wild.’

‘Possibly, but was that why he chose her? Or did he persuade her to dye her hair?’

‘Well, you know what you need to do?’

‘What?’

‘Talk to her stylist.’

‘Ahead of you. I have an appointment at 9 a.m.’

‘Good – nice and short and get highlights.’

He is so glad of his metal toecaps. As he tells Andi of Charlie’s death, her scissors fall and *ding* off the metal toe. If he had been wearing normal shoes they would have sliced through.

‘I only saw her a few days ago.’ She sits down in the chair.

‘Can you remember exactly when?’

‘Monday. Late morning I think, I’d need to check the book.’

‘How often did you see her?’

‘Every six weeks, maybe. She has – *had* – gorgeous hair, so full of life and bounce – most people were really jealous. She would come for a trim – one time she had a lot cut off but I think she really regretted it and she let it grow back. That was three years back though.’

‘Did she have a long-standing appointment for Monday?’

‘No, no it was weird. She’d only just been in, week before last. I didn’t think I’d see her for a while, but she phoned on Saturday.’

‘What exactly did she ask for?’

‘An appointment. Quick.’

‘She was in a hurry?’

‘It had to be Monday or Tuesday morning latest, that’s what she said. And I felt awful because I was fully booked.’

‘So what happened?’

‘I said no. She sounded dead disappointed. Then about an hour later I got a cancellation and called her back. She was really pleased.’

‘And she came in on the Monday morning.’

‘Yeah, and it was nearly a disaster because she didn’t say she wanted anything special. I thought it was just a tidy – I only set aside half an hour. But a dye job like that takes about three hours. I had to start it and get her to sit in the corner while it took, then a junior washed it and I squeezed the cut in when I should have been having my lunch.’

‘Was she happy with the finished look?’

‘She was over the moon. I have never seen her anything like that happy.’

‘And you?’

‘Oh I thought the whole thing was a big mistake. The colour didn’t suit her, made her look so pale – like a statue. But the customer is always right. Supposedly.’

Tom smiles. 'What was she like that day – did she seem nervous?'

'No. She seemed good. Really good – excited.'

'Do you know why that might have been?'

'No. It was just the impression I got.'

Tom nods. 'Can you remember what you talked about that day? Did she tell you why she chose the colour?'

Andi frowns. 'Not really. She could see I was surprised and not sure about it. I mean, I did try and talk her out of it. I actually thought it wouldn't take, her hair was too dark to go that shade of silver. It would mean too much bleaching, it could damage the hair and the scalp. I offered her a darker colour but she knew what she wanted – I mean, she knew the exact colour and shade.'

'How?'

'She . . .' Andi drops her voice to little more than a whisper. 'Customers normally have bits of fabric, like T-shirts or dresses. Sometimes they have bits of wallpaper – even paint charts sometimes.'

'But Charlie had something else?'

'She . . . this is weird. She had a lock of hair, she said she wanted that exact colour.'

'Human hair?'

'Yeah, human hair and it was dry – it wasn't freshly cut. It looked like it had been kept for years.'

7 p.m. Tom had asked them to wait for him. When he finally arrives at Charlie Brindley-Black's flat there are two SOCO officers, all kitted up, and Patterson. Each of them twiddling their thumbs and collecting overtime.

‘Let's start.’

Once again Tom snaps on the latex gloves, the shower cap and bags his shoes. Then they enter, cutting away the yellow and black tape that had sealed the room off since Charlie had been identified. The SOCO boys are about to enter when Tom stretches out his arm and holds them back.

‘We're looking for letters, notes, photos. We need her phone and diary – both personal and business. The office in the gallery had nothing, so maybe she noted appointments in something she kept here. We need to know if she had any meetings planned for Thursday and names and phone numbers if possible. And we're looking for anything that explains why she dyed her hair – and of course, why a knot was carved into the floor of the gallery. Okay?’

Everyone nods, they know the drill. He drops his arm and they enter like spacemen drifting in the vacuum. One of the SOCO men switches on powerful lights to flood the room, there are now no shadows and no hiding places. As the men move about, opening drawers and taking books from shelves, dust billows into the air, caught in the spotlight; turning and twisting like the stars in the heavens. Tom sends out a silent prayer to the deities of these dust galaxies to help him find the killer.

Four hours later their civilisations have crumbled, thanks to the SOCO hand-held mini-vac. The dust has been sucked up and bagged for analysis. As has all hairs and fabric fibres. Every surface has been dusted for fingerprints. All papers have been tagged and the

contents of all bins have been collected and their contents logged and filed. One of the SOCO team then swept the room with a black light, searching for blood. He got very excited by a patch at the foot of the bed but it turned out to be glittery nail varnish. No phone was found, no laptop or personal computer – no diary and no correspondence. A small amount of cannabis was turned up and a sizable supply of condoms and lubricant. No human hair samples and no dye charts or anything to shed light on the choice to dye her hair. They log a lot of art books and art materials – there are tickets for a Royal Academy show coming up and some theatre show later in the year. There are also a number of photo albums. Tom goes through them, they seem to be mostly from university – though there are a few of Charlie at glamorous art world parties. Tom already has three officers checking on her university friends but instinctively Tom feels that is a dead end. This crime is not something from her past – it will not prove itself to be an aggrieved ex-boyfriend or a love rival. Something in his gut tells him this was far more malevolent.

He sits on her bed and pulls open a drawer. Inside are piles of mix-tapes, each one appears themed: *happy songs*, *sad songs*, *opposite songs*, *songs of doomed love* and many many more.

‘You always gave me a mix-tape,’ Dani reminds him. ‘Every time you came to see me at uni – there was always a new one.’

‘Did you listen to them?’ he asks, though he knows she didn’t – which was probably good. They were pretty juvenile, though he enjoyed making them and spending hours in record stores to get things she might like. Every tape he made Dani ended with David Bowie’s ‘Be My Wife’. Or it would have if he hadn’t erased it every time.

‘You need to see this,’ one of the SOCO men calls over to Tom. ‘It’s a Polaroid. It was in this book.’

He hands over a copy of *On The Road* and a photo. It is of Charlie with her new hairstyle. In it she is topless. She looks brazenly at the camera, as if at a lover.

‘Very retro and arty – muted colours,’ The SOCO man offers.

Tom stares at the photo. ‘Patterson, I want to know who took this.’

‘How?’

‘Get someone in analysis to look at it. I want them to see if they can find a reflection in her eyes, in the glass behind her – anything. I want to see the photographer.’

Patterson looks incredulous. ‘You watch too much TV.’

‘Just get it to them.’

Patterson waits until he is out of the room to shake his head. In fact he is at the communal stairs before his phone rings and he answers it.

‘Oh fuck. Fuckety fuck fuck.’ He turns on his heel and runs back to the flat. ‘Guv!’

Tom hears the urgency and looks up.

‘We’ve got three more.’

Seven

Saturday 16 October 1999

Interpol finally fax over the full reports at 2 a.m. Three women killed: two found in Brussels, and the third in Amsterdam. Each of the women had silver-blond hair. Each of them had a single stab wound in the stomach and bled to death, the blood pooling around them. But these are not the details that brought these cases to Tom's attention – oh no. In each case, the women had a shape carved into their upper chests. A lark's head knot.

'You should get some sleep,' Dani tells him.

'I can sleep when I'm dead.'

'You're joking. That's an urban myth. There's no sleep for the dead.'

'Then I'll sleep when I'm fired.'

'Good idea, then you can lie-in until *Countdown* comes on. Or *Murder She Wrote*.'

Tom carries on reading and rereading the notes. Three murders were committed eighteen years earlier between September 1980 and June 1981, all similar to that of Charlie Brindley-Black. Why? How? And is this an English killer who went to Europe to try out his skills? Or a European murderer who settled here?

'Oh, Christ. Too many questions.'

'You should get some sleep.'

'I'll sleep when . . . ' He closes his eyes and lays his head down on his desk. In seconds he is gone.

Drool, like a string of pearls lace his lips together and hang down. A mug strikes the desk right by his head, which flicks up and the drool snaps.

‘What?’

‘Coffee, Guv.’ Patterson walks away, smiling.

Tom looks at his watch. It’s 6.35 a.m. He hadn’t meant to sleep, damn. He looks down at his desk . . .

‘Oh crap.’ He’s drooled on the Interpol files – right across one of the pictures of the murdered women and onto the yellow Post-it-note with his questions on it. His writing is smeared. He picks up the file to wipe it down... ‘Damnit Tom.’ He drops it. A small handwritten piece of paper falls out. It is the original contents list of the room the final victim was found in. Tom picks it up and... something strikes him. The list contains: *1 bottle silicone adhesive, 1 bottle latex/silicone lubricant*. He remembers something, and a jigsaw piece heaves into view.

‘Gap year?’ Drake spits it out like it’s poison. It didn’t sound ludicrous when it popped into Tom’s head. ‘Our killer was on a gap year in 1980 and killed three women?’

Tom winces slightly at the vehemence in his voice. Now, as Drake says it, it does sound—

‘Clutching at fucking straws, Bevans. Jesus. You are out of your depth and you’re fucking around.’

‘Sir—’

‘You’ll get a sodding psychic in next, Russell fucking Grant. Fuck, Bevans.’

‘Hear me out.’

‘No. Let me see you out – I am withdrawing your status as acting DI. We are going to alert Interpol that we believe a European killer has been in the UK but has now returned to Belgium, or Holland – either works. Then we’ll issue a statement to the press—’

‘Immigrant serial killers?’

‘That kind of thing. The *Daily Mail* will eat it up. We’ll say we are pretty sure he’s returned to Europe, but let’s keep vigilant.’

‘That is cynical—’

‘Zip it, Bevans. What the hell did I say to you when this started? Solve it or shelve it. Do you know what unsolved murders can do to coppers – to whole units? They are millstones around the neck of a department, they pull you down and make it so you can’t think – can’t go forward. Every day, every single fucking day there are new victims, new people needing our help. Dead babies, traumatised women and old people robbed and fucked. Every day a new load of victims that need us to be fresh and full of energy. Every day, Bevans. I know you know the stats, you’re not a half-wit. If a case is going to be solved it will usually be within seventy-two hours. But do you know why?’

Tom is silent.

‘You think it’s probably about evidence being lost after a few days, or witnesses’ memories degrading, the criminals flying overseas – but that isn’t it. If there is hard evidence to nail the fucker they will get nailed. The team will go through everything with a fine-toothed comb. But if it’s all messy and screwed up then after three days the case gets scaled

down and the investigation team move on to the next disaster, the next death and hope that will be quick and easy.’

‘But not everything is quick and easy.’

‘No, no it isn’t.’ The flash of anger dies away in Chief Superintendent Drake’s eyes. For a second he looks human. ‘Your girl, Danielle, the murderer was never found.’

Tom shakes his head in reply.

‘I appreciate the way you work, the way you think, I just don’t have room for it here. A detective inspector should be like a shark – he needs to constantly move forward, needs to be ruthless. Needs—’

‘Drop the case off the rota. Allocate all the resources back out, move on. I see you need to do that. Just leave me on it, just me alone. One man. Please, for a few days?’

‘No.’

‘Sir.’ Tom can’t believe it. ‘The force has invested twelve years in me. You said it yourself: I’m the best FLO around. Give me three days on this case and I will crack it and then go back to being a FLO. If you don’t agree, I’ll quit and the investment in me is a waste.’

‘And what will you do instead?’

‘Be a florist.’

Drake walks around his desk and looks directly into Tom’s eyes. ‘I don’t like having a gun put to my head.’

‘Think of it as a water pistol.’

Drake narrows his eyes. The two men stand unblinking for a few more seconds and then slowly Drake draws away.

‘I am going to give you three days, compassionate leave. Unpaid. At the end of that time you will return to your former duties as family liaison officer. Am I clear?’

‘Why compassionate leave?’

‘To get over your fucking girlfriend’s death. Forget about doing right by her, or honouring her memory or any of that shit. You understand?’

‘And if I find Charlie Brindley-Black’s killer?’

‘Then you to get to act like a smug fucker for a few minutes and then go back to being the best FLO in the force.’

Tom is still for a second, and then bows his head. ‘I understand.’

And Tom does, he fully understands what he must do.

Eight

Saturday 16 October 1999

He wears black jeans and a chunky fisherman's jumper with a leather jacket over the top. Without his uniform he feels almost naked. He gets off the tube at Piccadilly Circus and threads his way through the throng of tourists – each one taking photos where they appear to be shot by an arrow from the statue of Eros, Greek god of love. Tom notes the laughter, the colours – the buzz of being in one of the world's most beautiful and entertaining cities.

He heads away from the crowds into London's red-light district, Soho.

It's half-past one in the afternoon. Sunny, but chilly. The colours seem to fade as Tom heads into the smaller greyer streets. He avoids rubbish and sticky congealed gobs of chewing gum. At night the area blazes but now red lights are unlit and neon signs do not shine or flash, they look drab in the afternoon light though they still offer LIVE GIRLS, SEX SHOWS and FULL NUDITY. Tom ignores it all – even the many open doors with smiling women – little more than girls, most of them. Some call out to him, others sway slowly to music only they can hear, fingers beckon. Most of them are lovely looking, even those who shiver half naked in the cold. Tom looks ahead, not catching their eyes – he knows how it works. These are the new girls, for some it is their first week. They are the draw – acting like brightly coloured flowers, pulling the drones into the doorway. When the men go upstairs they will be serviced by older, less lovely women – those who have been doing this for years and have lost their lustre. It makes his heart shrivel in his chest.

'It's awful, can't you help them?' Dani-in-his-head asks.

‘No. Turn over any rock here and all you find is this kind of sadness, this kind of abuse. I can’t help.’ He strides on, getting faster.

‘I wish you hadn’t joined the police.’

‘If wishes were kisses . . .’

He turns into Walker’s Court and past the Raymond Revue bar. Two men lie in sleeping bags in the doorway, a small dog between them. Above them a poster announces: GLAMOUR! Tom marches on. Walker’s Court is a thin pedestrian alleyway, an arcade of pornography that spills out into Berwick Street market. Everywhere there are breasts and penises – blown-up in photos or posable in rubber. He pauses before the small door to a shop called Pornucopia. Stuck on the widow, lopsided, is a small printed sign – MADE-TO-ORDER SEX TOYS HERE. Tom walks inside.

At the front of the shop are racks of books, they are old and dog-eared but none of them pornographic. Mostly they are kids’ books. It is a strange Westminster bylaw that says bookshops can carry a certain amount of hard-core pornographic magazines. So dirty magazine shops carry piles and piles of regular books – nobody buys them, nobody comes in to read them – but they are there. He sees a copy of *Black Beauty* at the front of a stack. At the back of the shop there is a pile of magazines full of photos of women fellating horses. It is an irony not lost on Tom Bevans.

There are no customers in the shop, just a single sales assistant sitting on a stool behind the counter, reading. He has a large bald head and wears a T-shirt two sizes too small. He reminds Tom of a giant baby. Surrounding the counter are boxes of sex dolls – most are moulded on porn-star bodies and are pneumatically well endowed. Others hold just heads with huge mouths – they look incredibly startled – or vaginas in boxes.

‘I’m looking for Finn.’ Tom doesn’t pull out his warrant card, which makes him feel self-conscious.

The giant baby doesn’t even look up from his magazine. ‘No idea,’ he gurgles.

Tom opens his wallet and takes out a ten-pound note that he slides across the counter and under the magazine. The assistant looks over the mag.

‘Please tell Finn I’m looking for something . . . special. If you get my drift.’ And Tom gives him the best leer he can muster.

‘Hang on.’ He heaves himself off his stool and disappears through a door at the back of the shop. Tom looks down at the magazine he was reading – *Chicks with Dicks XXXI*.

After a minute the assistant lumbers back through the door. ‘He’s coming.’

Tom waits a few minutes before a grinning Cheshire cat of a man emerges. He sees Tom and his smile is replaced with a scowl.

‘Hello, Finn.’

‘Blast from the past. Long time, PC Bevans.’

‘At least six years. And it’s DI Bevans now – and I’ve got nothing to do with vice.’

‘Nor me.’ Finn says it with such a straight face Tom can’t help but laugh. It is the first time he has laughed in a while.

‘I’m not here to cause trouble. I need information.’

‘Giving you information is the most trouble I could get into, Detective Inspector.’

‘It’s murder, Finn.’

‘It’ll be that millennium bug – gonna get us all.’

‘A girl was murdered.’

‘That ain’t news, not round here. This street alone is full of a hundred girls beggin’ to get done in. This is a fucking toilet. They come and go so fast—’

‘This girl had her stomach split open, and she was bled dry’

The big baby almost falls off his chair. ‘Holy shit-suckers.’

Finn narrows his eyes. ‘I don’t understand. What has this got to do with me?’

‘Nothing. But I think you might be able to help find the killer. You can do a good deed.’

He looks blank for a second then turns to the other man. ‘Go for a walk, Dave.’

‘Don’t wanna,’ Dave says, too interested in the murder.

‘Then go to the toilet for ten minutes.’

‘But—’

‘Go, now!’

‘Okay,’ he says annoyed and shifts off the chair. ‘Can I take this with me?’ He waves the magazine.

‘Christ, Dave. Okay, but keep it clean – we gotta sell that afterwards.’

‘Okay.’ And he leaves through the back door. Finn walks to the front of the shop and turns the key in the door.

‘I’m all ears, Detective Inspector.’

Tom nods. ‘The sign on your door – made to order sex dolls. I want to know about them.’

Finn opens his arms. ‘Look around, blow-up bags you can fuck. Generally they’re for men who are triple ugly or just have no social skills and are desperate. The dolls don’t need to be wined, dined or talked to. There are a few men who actually like the feel of latex on their manhood – a few.’

‘But these are just—’

‘Hold your horses, I’m getting there.’ Finn lights a cigarette. ‘The better quality dolls are silicone gel – a moulding process that was specifically invented for sex toys.’

‘Your industry’s contribution to science?’

‘I like to think so. The dolls are generally moulded from porn stars’ bodies, so most have big T&A. There are also your chunky dolls and some made to look like pop stars, you got your Britney for your lovers of dirty white teens, you got your Mariah for the busty Latino and we got your Janet for the connoisseurs of dark love.’

‘But these are all mass-produced dolls aren’t they? Your sign says “made to order”, how does that work? How personalised can they be? Can you choose hair colour and style, height and body shape – can you add a particular tattoo . . .?’

‘That is more than we offer.’

‘But does somebody?’

‘Sure, if you pay. In America and Japan you can get just what you want. Real dolls they call them. Men treat them like girlfriends, take them on holiday, buy them clothes and all that shit.’

‘And you can make them look like anyone you want?’

‘Not the most reputable companies – they have their own styles, but there are others. Smaller companies, the niche end of the market. You send in a photo and they make her for you. Or him.’

Tom thinks for a second. ‘What about here, in Europe?’

‘Not any more. Technology took over from technique.’

‘But what about before that? Was there somebody in the past – say early eighties?’

Finn thinks for a second, then his face lights up. ‘Oh yeah, there was the silicone king – what was his real name . . . anyway he was a pioneer, an innovator. He used silicone and latex together for the first time. Made realistic-feeling skin. He was as much scientist and chemist as porno innovator – amazing. I mean, I never met him myself, but the guy’s a legend.’

‘For creating a realistic feel?’

‘Yeah, but the other trick was that you had to go for a fitting.’

‘And?’

‘He measured your – you know . . .’ He points down to his crotch. ‘He made sure Mr Happy was decidedly happy. Bespoke really meant bespoke with him.’

Tom feels himself blush.

‘The story went that he used to work for Madame Tussauds, was the best in the business for getting the likeness of a celebrity, a genuine craftsman. Then one night, security found him fucking one of the waxworks – it might have been Grace Kelly, I don’t remember

the details. When they checked the female waxworks they found he'd given half of them silicone and latex sex parts and would come in at night and screw them. They sacked him there and then, he left and started his own business.'

'Making sex dolls?'

'Making celebrity dolls who never say no. He was ahead of his time.'

'Where was he based?'

'Amsterdam – right in the heart of the red-light district.'

'In the eighties?'

'Yes.'

Tom feels the skin on the back of his neck tighten. 'I need a name.'

'He's probably dead.'

'I need a name.'

'I'll call my dad.'

Tom's eyebrow rises.

'This is a family business – he'll remember his name, might even have a number. But how does this help find a killer here and now in London?'

'Please get the name.'

Finn calls his father and they get a name – Maarten Meyer.

The day has almost died. Tom sits in his living room and waits. It is probably too late now, too late to get the call. The officer at Interpol had been very helpful. She promised she would get back to Tom as soon as Maarten Meyer, the silicone sex-doll king, was found, but that would be tomorrow now. If they found him, if he was alive, if—

‘A lot of ifs.’ Dani-in-his-head says.

‘A lot, but . . .’ tiredness leaves the line unfinished.

He goes through his thinking once more. Is this a credible chain of events, or just wishful thinking? He opens the case files again and looks at the sections he’s underlined. The three cases that Interpol dug up from 1980–1981. The first was from September 1980 and took place in Brussels: Dominique Duchelle, who was well known to the police as a dominatrix and had her own dungeon. She was found tied to what the police on the scene described as a crucifix – though from crime-scene photos Tom thinks it was the sexual apparatus that she used to tie men to and whip them. She had been lashed to it and a lark’s head knot carved into her chest while she was conscious. Blood splatter showed this. Then she was stabbed. The knife entered the left side of her abdomen and then was pulled right, slicing the belly and leading to fatal blood loss. It would have been quick. The blood then ran from the wound and pooled on the floor. Under analysis it was found to have been mixed with semen. Presumably the killer’s, though she had not been sexually abused. This led the police to decide the killer masturbated while the woman died. As an after-thought the notes add that she was wearing a silver wig that none of her friends had ever seen before.

Case two was a month later. Again she was a known prostitute, Gretta Sussmann, aged twenty-three. She was killed in the flat she used for business. This time she was found tied to the floor. Again she wore a silver wig, and again the wound to the belly was a deep horizontal cut. This time both facts were written up in the main notes and it was linked to the

killing the previous month. The lark's head pattern was carved post-mortem. No trace of semen was found near the body – but a plastic apron and underpants with semen on them were found in a public rubbish bin on the corner of the street.

Tom feels sick. He can see that despite so many avenues of investigation, the police did almost nothing to find the man who killed these three women. These three prostitutes... *hardly worth the effort*, he imagines the police thought back then. It makes him so angry. A tear run down his cheeks. There is nobody to champion the dead girls – except him. He will find the man who did this.

‘For me?’ Dani asks.

‘For you, for them, but mostly . . .’

‘For yourself.’

The final case was April 1981 and was in Amsterdam. The scenario was basically the same, a prostitute, name unknown, was killed by a knife wound to the stomach and bled to death. The difference here was that her hair was silver white. It was assessed to have been dyed like that for many months prior to death. The knot symbol had been carved into her post-mortem. No semen was discovered at the site but...

‘The contents of her flat. The list said: *silicone adhesive and latex/silicone lubricant* – that was why you went to see Finn?’ Dani asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Because you had considered . . .’

‘You know what I thought, Dani, you’re in my head.’

‘I don’t peek. Your thoughts are your own.’

Tom laughs wryly. It was exactly these two items that sent him to see Finn. ‘I thought he might have used a rubber vagina. It was a natural progression from masturbating into his underpants.’

‘A hunch? Or . . .’

The truth is that he already knew about ‘real dolls’, he had seen a short film and visited the website. Once, in the wee small hours of a lonely morning, he had thought they could make him Dani. A Dani he could touch, caress – he had imagined kissing her and making love to her – so desperately wanting her to be real. He shudders at the thought now.

‘Lonely?’ she asks.

He sighs. ‘So lonely.’

The phone rings. It is almost midnight.

‘Detective Inspector Tom Bevans.’

‘I said I would call you back when we found him.’ The Interpol officer sounds tired but elated.

‘He’s alive?’

‘Oh yes. He’s in prison for fraud – has been for the last seven years. I have the telephone number of the prison for you.’

Nine

Sunday 17 October 1999

Tom has to wait until after church to speak to the prison governor, who is a god-fearing man. While he waits he calls British Airways and checks flights to Schiphol airport. He books one for 6 a.m. the next morning with a return at 8 p.m. the same day. He has no idea if Drake will pay for the ticket but he knows he needs to go. Finally he speaks to the governor, who sounds like he is chewing a sandwich, but he agrees to let Tom talk to Meyer the next day.

‘I want to ask him about a man he may have met in 1980 or ’81. Is there any chance Mr Meyer might recall that far back?’ Tom asks, trying to keep the desperation from his voice.

‘Detective Inspector Bevans. If Maarten Meyer met a man in connection with his work, he will remember him. His memory is astonishing.’

Tom sees the day stretch out before him. He has never liked Sundays, they were always so boring when he was a child. Usually he would wake at six and know his parents would sleep until noon at least – both with dreadful hangovers. The living room was normally dark and full of empty bottles and ashtrays that stank. TV was not allowed until his parents were up and he was not allowed to leave the flat until then. He would read, that was his way to escape. At about 2 p.m. when at least his mum was awake, they would walk over to his grandmother’s for lunch. It would be roast chicken or roast pork. Either way the meat was dry, the potatoes like bullets and the vegetables had been boiling since Tuesday. Only the gravy was edible. Sometimes he dreamt of that gravy. After lunch everyone but him would fall asleep and he would have to watch the television, which was mostly boring except *The*

High Chaparral. He drew the line at *Last of the Summer Wine* and would rather sit in the kitchen, at his nan's Formica table reading the local newspaper. At about 7 p.m. they would have tea. He would make a grilled sandwich of tinned sardines, cold baked beans and cheese. Then they'd go home and his parents would start to drink again. Sunday bloody Sunday.

He walks into the park and over to the Observatory. He remembers lying on the grass there years before, what eighteen years ago? Observing the skies with Dani and Izzy. There was supposed to be a meteor shower. It was a bust though – the cloud was too heavy and the three of them just lay there and talked about the future, what they would like to be when they were grown. Izzy wanted to travel the world, maybe as a wildlife photographer. Dani was still running then and wanted to be an international athlete. Tom remembers his mind going blank, all he wanted to say was – *I'll tag along with you*. But he couldn't. Instead he mumbled something about international aid – it sounded good and kind and laudable. He hadn't meant it; his head had been full of Dani.

Here, in the present, he lies down in the grass and looks up at the clouds that skit above him. What would he tell the young Tom, if he could go back in time? He thinks hard, but doesn't know what he would say. His imagination has entropied – that was what twelve years in the police did for you. Fact after fact after fact. Then he remembers: just as they were about to leave, the sky cleared and they saw a meteor fizz by. Then another, and another, all in CinemaScope. The shooting stars were all they could see.

He lies there for an hour. It is 2 p.m. and he realises he is quite depressed. Without work to keep his mind occupied he drifts into the past and seeks memories of her. He needs to stay in the present. *Be here now*, he tells himself.

‘Yeah, right,’ Dani-in-his-head laughs.

He walks to Valerie Brindley-Black’s house. A question is forming in his head but he can’t quite grasp its tail. It takes an hour to get there and as he walks, he thinks about Charlie and the knot of blood. On arrival he rings the doorbell. As it opens he begins to greet her.

‘Mrs Brindley-Bl . . .’ He trails off. The woman at the door looks like Valerie but it is not her.

‘Can I help you?’ she asks, her voice soft.

‘I’m Detective Inspector Bevans. Is . . . your sister here?’ He instinctively knows this is the woman she went to when her husband died of cancer. Sophie Brindley.

‘She’s asleep. Sedated. I don’t think I could wake her even if I wanted to.’

Tom nods, he understands. He is reminded of Patty, Dani’s mother. She was a crime journalist, prided herself that she had seen the very worst of human vice and corruption and still remained distanced enough to document it – until it was her own child. In those first days after the terrible news, she was out cold – zombified by drugs. Later, when she was back to normal, she was disgusted with herself, disgusted that she gave in to the darkness at the most important time to find the killer. She has blamed herself ever since for the fact that the killer was never found. Tom hopes Valerie never feels such regret.

‘Please tell your sister I called.’

‘Is there some news?’

‘No, no news.’

She slowly nods her head, to show she understands the import of what he had just said. ‘I am going to stay with my sister until . . .’

‘Good. That’s kind of you. I am sure she appreciates that.’

‘My children will be here soon too. They were very close to Charlie.’

‘Where are they coming from?’

‘Overseas. Helena, the older one lives in Tanzania and Lucy in Nicaragua. They both work for small charities.’

‘You must miss them.’

‘Of course,’ she laughs to herself. ‘But then I tell myself what a brilliant job I did raising two such extraordinary people.’

He smiles. ‘That’s a good way to look at it.’

‘The three of them were close, like peas in a pod when they were children.’ Her face crumples a little.

‘I’d like to talk to them at some point about Charlie. Do you know if they kept in touch, maybe email?’

‘Birthdays, Christmas – maybe more, I don’t know. They will be here for a few days, you could ask them. Unfortunately they can’t stay long.’

He nods. ‘I’ll call to make an appointment.’

‘There is a memorial service on Tuesday. Just small, so that they can be present. We don’t know when . . .’ a spasm of grief runs through her ‘. . . the body will be released. I am sure Valerie would . . .’

‘Thank you.’ The two of them stand in silence for a few seconds. ‘I should go.’ He turns and is about to walk away, when he realises what sits in his pocket. He pulls out the

small, paperback copy of *On the Road*. Inside is the Polaroid he found at Charlie's flat. He turns back to the door.

'I found this in Charlie's things.' He hands the book to her, the photo pokes out a little. 'Inside is a photograph of her taken in the last couple of days – it is a little intimate. I thought it should go back to Mrs Brindley-Black. Could you?'

'Intimate?'

'Nothing really embarrassing – just a private photo. I thought Valerie would like to keep it, rather than it go into the evidence file.' Tom squirms a little.

'That is a rare kindness in today's world,' she opens the book and looks at the photograph. A cloud sweeps her face. Tom sees her hand shake a little.

'What is wr—'

'This isn't my niece.'

'Not Charlie?'

'No, this is my sister. This is Jennifer, my elder sister. This picture is almost thirty years old.'

Tom feels the ground beneath his feet shift a little.

'Valerie said she only had one sister.'

'Only one alive. Our elder sister is dead – killed when she was nineteen.'

'And this is her.'

'Yes.'

‘Her hair?’

‘Was the most striking silver white. It was so beautiful.’

‘Did you know your niece dyed her hair, exactly like this, two days before she died?’

‘No. No, nobody said that.’

‘How did your sister die?’

After a significant pause, she says, ‘She was killed by a rug.’

‘A rug?’ he asks.

She nods, almost apologetically. ‘It was a horrible accident.’ She stops. Evidently, the memories have been locked away for so long they are difficult to recover.

‘What happened? Are you okay to—’

‘She was driving home, she’d gone to see a band . . . T-Rex, they were playing at some festival. She was in love with Marc Bolan. It was a week before Christmas. She had slept on a friend’s sofa after the gig and got up early the next morning to drive home. Such a long way, and we told her to be careful. She was – she was a good girl.’ Sophie is lost in the memories of her sister for a minute. Tom waits patiently for her to come back to the present. ‘But sometimes you can’t be careful enough can you – some things just come out of the blue, out of nowhere. How can you be safe all the time?’

Tom holds her eyes, he doesn’t blink. The pain in his face loosens her tongue and thirty-year-old tears return and run down her cheeks.

‘She was on the motorway – nothing ahead of her, clear for miles. But a car was driving on an overpass, a slip road that led onto the motorway. A woman was driving fast and

a deer ran out in front of her . . . she swerved and a large rolled rug on her roof came loose and flew into the air.’ Tom sees her face shift as the memories flood over her. He can see that, even though she wasn’t there, she imagines its trajectory; sees her sister in the little car, oblivious to her impending death – singing, happy to have seen her beloved Marc Bolan. The carpet arcs through the heavens – coming closer and closer until it smashes through the windscreen and . . . ‘It was a dreadful tragedy all round. The woman who caused the accident had a breakdown, the guilt of it all. She hanged herself a few weeks later.’

‘Was there anyone else there?’

‘The woman’s son was in the car. No more than a boy.’

‘Do you remember their names?’

‘She was Anna . . . Anna something. And the boy, what was his name?’ Tom watches her try to prise the name from her memory. ‘Oh, this is dreadful. I can still see his quivering lip, his tears. But his name . . .’ Then her face clears as it seems to come to her. ‘George. The boy’s name was George.’

‘The surname?’

She shakes her head. ‘I can’t remember. Isn’t that awful? I just can’t recall it.’

It is 9pm. Tom stands on the threshold and breathes. This is crossing a line, he knows that. Drake will not be happy with one of his officers calling unannounced at his home, but Tom is running out of time. He can see that something is happening this evening, lights blaze from every window and the drive and street around the house are packed with cars. With a slightly shaking hand he reaches out to the doorbell and touches it. Somewhere, deep inside the large

house, a bell rings. He waits for a few minutes and the door is pulled open with great gusto. Standing there with a huge smile on his face and wearing a pink apron that says *you are my cupcake* is Chief Superintendent Drake. The smile dies on his lips as he sees it is Tom standing there.

‘What the fuck do you want Bevans?’

Tom hands him a file. ‘This is the killer.’

After leaving Sophie Brindley in the early afternoon, Tom had spent the rest of the day finding the accidental death reports on Jennifer Brindley from 1971. They corroborated everything Sophie had said. Then he found the report of the driver’s suicide three weeks after the accident, and finally he found reference to her son: George Albert Fforde-Merrison. A hunch had driven him onwards to find out that, despite his father being alive, George had been placed in care after his mother’s death. From there it had been easy to find the documents committing the boy to a psychiatric hospital. He was institutionalised a month after his mother’s suicide. But after that George disappeared. In fact, the last note on his file, from his doctor at the asylum, said he thought George Fforde-Merrison planned to go to Europe. ‘He talked about Belgium.’ The doctor wrote. That was in March 1980.

Drake eyes the folder Tom has given him with suspicion. Then with a sigh, he walks inside the house and along the hallway. Tom hesitates for a second and then follows him, pulling the front door closed. Drake stops at a door and goes inside, it is the kitchen. He pulls a tray of mini pies from the oven and then sits at the table and begins to read. Tom looks around the room – he could get his whole flat in this kitchen. From somewhere the sound of

laughter bubbles up and Mrs Drake walks into her kitchen, the laughter trailing behind her. She gives Tom a perfect hostess smile. ‘Can I get you a glass of something?’

Drake calls out to his wife without looking up. ‘Don’t bother with him, he’s staff – and that might only be for another day or two.’

She smiles again at Tom, then opens the enormous fridge in the corner and seems to climb inside. Her husband continues to read – he goes over the cover sheet in detail then flicks through the rest of the report. When he’s done he throws it back towards Tom. ‘George Albert Fforde-Merrison.’ He says the name with distaste. ‘Born 1959 – missing presumed dead. Is this it?’

‘Charlie Brindley-Black was a dead ringer for her aunt who was killed by George Ffor—’

‘Oh, fuck me sideways, Bevans.’

‘Language, darling.’ Drake’s wife calls out, with an icy echo from deep inside the fridge. She emerges with a handful of cheeses. ‘I’m about to serve the cheese tray, are you going to be much longer?’

‘No. I’m not, am I, *Sergeant* Bevans?’

‘Good.’ She says as she walks back to her guests. ‘Nice to meet you.’

Drake waits until she has gone and then hisses at his junior officer. ‘Jennifer Brindley was killed in a road accident at the age of nineteen. At the scene was a child—’

‘The accident was caused by a carpet which was on the roof of one car. It became unattached and flew off from an overhead slip road and onto a motorway. It struck Jennifer

Brindley's car – embedded itself in the passenger seat and flung her through the windscreen. She died from her injuries – a shard of glass ripped her stomach open.'

'Christ, Bevans.' He shakes his head. 'You come to my house on a Sunday evening, drag me out of a dinner party . . .'

'Sir—'

' . . . from a dinner party congratulating my son on a new job, to listen to this shit. This isn't policing. Bevans. I am very disappointed. I will talk to you tomorrow.'

'I won't be in the office tomorrow.'

'Why?'

'I'm going to Amsterdam to question a witness.'

'Not on my fucking budget you're not. I want to see you in my office tomorrow at 9 a.m., or don't fucking bother to come in ever again.'

'Goodbye, sir. I will tender my resignation on Tuesday.'

'Well, you better post it because you are not setting a foot inside my fucking unit.'

Tom takes the file and leaves. He looks at his watch as he walks down the street. It is 10 p.m. His flight is in eight hours.

Eleven

Monday 17 October 1999

It is an open prison, fifty kilometres from Amsterdam. It is specifically used for white-collar crime – fraud and embezzlement are its speciality. It reminds Tom of an up-market care home designed by IKEA. Everywhere there are units, shelves and pull-out drawers. It's nothing like the cramped Victorian monstrosities he's used to at home. The area for waiting is white and kidney-shaped. It has recessed lighting and a free-to-use espresso machine. Tom makes himself one and paces around. On the table are glossy magazines – from this month, not eight years out of date like they would be in England. He isn't in Kansas any more, or Greenwich. He's in the Netherlands, for the first time. He should be celebrating this rare trip overseas – but he can't. He looks at his watch for the thousandth time this morning.

'Come on,' he says through gritted teeth.

'Take it easy. We always talked about travelling – here we are. Let's celebrate.'

'There's too much at stake, Dani.'

Today, Tom wears his uniform and looks professional. His hair is Brylcreemed and he shaved in the airport, just before taking a cab to the prison. He carries his warrant card and has signed in as DI Bevans. He trusts to luck that no one will call the department and check he is who he says he is. At three that morning he had been at his desk sending confirmation emails – luckily Drake hadn't leapt into action and rescinded his access. Tom hadn't thought he would. Tom also put his expenses claim into the system and filed it for Friday's date. He wasn't keen on being £300 out of pocket on this kamikaze mission.

‘Vig Berends.’ The prison governor introduces himself, holding out his hand and the two men shake. ‘I will take you to Mr Meyer – please forgive my poor English.’ He says, his language perfect. ‘Follow me.’ The two men walk down a long, well-lit corridor that has prisoner artwork all along one side. Berends points to the art as they walk. ‘Here we believe in rehabilitation and that art is the perfect way to calm the mind and reflect upon one’s past misdemeanours.’

‘Impressive,’ Tom murmurs unconvincingly.

They reach a gate and are waved through by a bored-looking guard. ‘Maarten Meyer has been an exemplary prisoner,’ the governor continues. ‘He was already an artist when he arrived here and we have allowed him to sculpt – which he has taken to with a real passion.’

They arrive at a communal area, a large room with tables and sofas. There is a coffee machine in the corner and fresh pastries on a counter. A few men sit around playing cards and one sits alone looking out of the window. The governor points to him and tells Tom that is Maarten Meyer. Tom thanks him and walks over.

‘Mr Meyer.’ Tom holds out his hand to the man who sits staring out of the window. ‘I am Detective Inspector Bevans of the Metropolitan Police, I would like to talk to you.’ Meyer, unresponsive, continues to look out of the window. ‘You are under no obligation to help me but I would be grateful if you would answer a few questions. It is a case of murder. The questions I have for you go back a long time, to 1980 and 1981.’

Meyer slowly looks up into Tom’s face. He is an old man, bald except for a few strands of ratty grey-brown fibre around the ears. His face is mahogany with sun. Tom can’t tell if he has heard a word.

‘The man I am looking for killed three women in 1980 and 1981 and just recently killed again.’

Meyer gives out a raspy breath and the leather creases around the eyes. His English is rusty but Tom understands him. ‘So long, so many years between. I thought it had worked, that the beast was safe. I did my best.’

Tom sits down beside him. The old man bows his head. Tom takes a picture of Charlie from his pocket – it shows her head, nothing of the knot of blood. ‘This is the girl who was killed a few days ago.’ Meyer keeps his head bowed. ‘Please look at it.’ Slowly he pulls his head up and looks at the image.

‘It is the same. The same as all those years ago.’

‘Will you tell me what happened?’

‘I did nothing wrong. I helped to keep women safe.’

Tom keeps any anger from his voice. He looks deeply into the old man’s face. ‘I know that, you tried to help. I think you made a man a very special doll. A doll you hoped would keep him from hurting another woman.’

‘He came to me in tears, desperate – he said he had killed, that he couldn’t help himself. That if I did not help him he would end his life. I was scared . . .’

‘He threatened you?’

‘No. Not threatened me . . .’ he pauses and a far-away look fills the old face. ‘My son took his own life.’

‘I see.’ And he does. Tom Bevans knows about the need to try and save another life, any life. He understands atonement. ‘Please, tell me about your meeting with – George?’

The old man nods. ‘Yes, George, that was his name. He came to me. I lived in a building in Amsterdam, a run-down apartment block. In it many prostitutes worked. One night this young man pounded on my door, he took my hand and led me up two flights of stairs. There I saw the poor girl. I had said hello to her on the stairs once or twice. I didn’t even know her name. She was dead. He begged me to help him stop, said he must not kill again. He knew who I was, what skills I had and he asked me to make him a lover. A woman with silver-blond hair and golden eyes. He wanted to be free.’

‘Free?’

‘Yes a freedom, without the past dragging him down to a kind of hell. Without desire for this woman crippling him. He wanted to be set free.’

‘And you made him this . . .’

‘Lover. Yes. I made her for him.’

‘Knowing what he had done?’

‘Believing he wanted to be something else. Something better.’

‘How long did it take?’

‘A few days. Most of the time he was there, watching – advising, commenting on the skin tone, the hair colouring.’

Tom pauses, his brain racing. He had been right, these cases all tied up, everything led to George Fforde-Merrison.

‘Can you describe him for me, physically?’

‘It was a long time ago.’

‘What do you remember most about him?’

Pause. ‘He had the most beautiful penis I had ever seen.’

Tom knows that description won’t make it into his case notes.

‘His name – George Fforde-Merrison?’

‘No. No that was not the name he used. It was . . .’ The old man dredges his memory.

‘Larkshead – that was it, George Larkshead.’

Twelve

Tuesday 18 October 1999

Watery sun kisses Tom's cheek as he sits in the grounds of the chapel. He wears his dress uniform – the creases are immaculate. He picks up his coffee cup from the side of the bench and finishes the final bitter dregs. He did not sleep last night. After he left Maarten Meyer he rushed back to Schiphol and paid an extra £150 to get an earlier flight home. From Heathrow he called Drake, but the man wouldn't accept his call. It's funny, last night in Terminal Three at Heathrow Airport, Tom Bevans had been the angriest he had ever been. He had screamed into the phone, he had kicked at a wall, he had bellowed in rage and frustration. Then he had made another phone call and taken a cab to New Scotland Yard. He had crossed the line from team player to . . . what? Drake and Ashe would say team wrecker, snitch, nark—

‘Whistle-blower?’ asks Dani.

‘Not sure,’ he thinks. Except, at 10.a.m., sitting in the chapel grounds and waiting for the Brindley-Black family he is calm and focused – a different man.

He is an hour early, there is another funeral happening now. He watches a single figure who also sits on a bench outside the chapel. She wears a blue fleece coat and carries a two-litre bottle of Coke. There seems something awfully sad about her. Milling around the doors are about a hundred people, all waiting to go inside to pay their respects. Tom is amazed at some of the outfits – so many men are in mismatched grey and blue suits. Many women do wear black, but a lot have inappropriate cocktail dresses that come just below the underwear line and squeeze their boobs up and out. It looks like a parody of a funeral. He wonders who it can be for. A tall man dressed in black mourning dress appears and ushers

them into the chapel, just as the hearse rounds the corner. It parks and the pallbearers get out. One of them walks over to the woman sitting alone and kisses her on the top of the head. Then he returns to the others and gently they lift the casket and bear it inside. The woman waiting makes no move to follow. She continues to sit in silent vigil. Who is she? Tom wonders if she is an estranged partner – a lost sister – the black sheep returned. He will never know.

He looks at his watch. The memorial for Charlie Brindley-Black is at 11 a.m. He is early, in part because he needs to snatch just an hour of peace before the final storm crashes down – and also because he thinks George Larkshead may make an appearance.

He sits and listens to the service going on inside, he can't hear the priest talk but he hears the congregation intone the Lord's Prayer and later they sing 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. The music they exit to is sung by Matt Monroe. Tom recognises his voice as he was one of his mum's favourites. As one group of grieving people leave, another mourning tribe arrives. They have no casket, the body is yet to be released – there is no hearse and no funeral director. Tom can see Valerie at the centre, heavily supported by her sister and next to her . . .

'Christ.' Tom's breathing stops. A beautiful, beautiful woman with gold eyes and light hair. She looks so like Charlie and her aunt. *Peas in a pod*, Sophie Brindley had said, Helena and Lucy and Charlie. Tom hadn't made the connection before – *physical* peas in a pod, she looks just like Charlie. One. There is one of Sophie's children there – Helena or Lucy – but where is the other? Tom feels his heart start to race and walks towards them. Valerie sees him and raises her hand to him. Sophie sees her sister's movement and follows her line of sight. She smiles at Tom . . . but then the expression on her face freezes. Sophie Brindley looks suddenly scared.

‘Why are you here, DI Bevans?’ she calls to him as he walks forward.

‘You said I should—’

‘But your sergeant telephoned before we left. He said you would be around in a minute to collect the book with the photograph – the one of Jennifer.’

‘I never . . .’

‘Lucy stayed behind to give it to you.’

The world pitches. Sophie stumbles, Valerie with her. Tom is already turning away from them. ‘Call 999.’ He shouts back at them as he sprints away. He was never as fast as Dani but he runs as if the devil is at his heels. The house isn’t far, three minutes maybe. His arms pump like pistons as he eats up the distance between him and Lucy Brindley. His coat is swinging around him, he fishes the radio out of the pocket and discards the coat. His lungs are starting to boil. He slows slightly and brings the radio up to his mouth.

‘Patterson. The murderer may be at the Brindley-Black home. Potential victim there too.’

Static. ‘Fuck. On our way.’

Tom drops his arm and clips the radio onto his trousers – thank God he has the radio.

‘Let her be okay. Lucy, Lucy stay with me.’

He speeds up again. His throat burns with the effort of running, his knees are hurting – tears run down his cheeks. This is no time for sadness, he tells himself. Two more roads. Adrenalin powers through him, he flies towards his fear. He sees the knife slicing her belly. His stride stretches open, a bus is coming – he runs out in front, there is a squeal of brakes, he flies past. The air full of profanity. He can see the house and the front door, it’s open. A man

is stepping through it, about to leave the house, he has a round face with spectacles, short thinning blond hair. About five feet seven inches, paunchy, early forties maybe. The man hears the brakes of the bus and looks towards the commotion. He sees Tom racing towards him, his face turns white. He jumps back inside and slams the front door. Tom is there seconds later, he doesn't pause but brings his boot up and the door shatters. Wood splinters and the lock flies away and bounces off the wall.

'George!' he yells – shredding what was left of his voice. 'Come out, it's all over.'

There is a scream from upstairs.

'LUCY!' Tom yells and rushes toward her voice. 'LUCY!'

He has no sense of fear, no sense to wait for help, but runs towards the sound – he will save this girl, he will – the man appears at the top of the stairs just as Tom gets there. Tom closes his fist and throws it forward – his whole body moving like a train – he doesn't see the glint of silver, just feels the blade slide into his belly. His fist bounces pathetically off George's shoulder. He is close enough to smell the man's breath, see the twist of his mouth. The momentum has taken him into the killer's arms, he is stuck like a pig on the thin blade, it slices into him like a hot knife through butter. George's other hand slides around him, holding him steady for the kill. Tom feels the man's shoulder start to move – he will gather his strength and then flick the knife sideways. It will cut through his abdomen and he will bleed to death like a man committing hara-kiri.

Tom tries to rock back but the man holds him. He smiles. Tom can feel George's erection against him, maybe that is why the killer pauses. The pause is all he needs. Tom moves his hand into his jacket pocket and feels the thin disc of the *ban the bomb* badge still

inside – his good-luck charm with its sharp pin. He pulls it out and stabs it into George’s hand.

‘Agh!’ he yells and releases his grip.

Tom pushes back with all his might, the blade in him starts to move sideways, it burns and burns and – is out of his belly. He is in free-fall backwards. Everything is in slow motion. He grabs at his stomach as blood starts to pump – there is a spray in mid-air, like red rain. From somewhere far off there is a siren. For a second he is weightless, like an astronaut or a bird in flight, arcing back and—

‘Christ!’ He cries out with the all-consuming pain.

He lands head and shoulder on the stairs, he crunches and starts to flip over, he tries to turn, raise his head, his arm catches on the banister, nearly twists it off, he slams back into the stairs and slide-crashes down them, landing in a heap at the bottom. From the road there is a squeal of brakes and slamming doors. The cavalry are coming. George peers down the stairs, Tom can only see him in a haze – he is a sitting duck. The man could jump down and kill him with a single strike – but he makes no move to. *Is he crying?* Suddenly feet are pounding on the pavement outside. Tom looks to the front door for a second and . . . the killer is gone.

Tom lies at the bottom of the stairs, pressing his hands into his stomach – he can feel the wet and sticky blood, it coats them, the pulse pulse pulse of his heart pushing it out. He tries to exert more pressure but it hurts so much he wants to scream, in fact, he may be screaming, he can’t tell, his head spins – keep pressure – but his hands are numb, his arms and . . .

Thirteen

Tuesday 18 October 1999

His throat has been sandpapered. He shifts slightly and his stomach feels like it will split apart.

‘Christ,’ he croaks.

‘You’re my hero,’ Dani-in-his-head tells him.

He ignores her and tries to open his eyes. They don’t want to. Suddenly Tom feels a wet sponge placed against his lips and squeezed, he sucks greedily. Then the sponge licks over his face and into his eyes. The lids separate a little, enough to see a blur of light and shape. It hurts.

‘I’ll call a doctor.’

Tom doesn’t recognise the voice. Then black washes in again and he slips away.

He comes round again, two hours later. The pain in his belly is still there but the throbbing headache has lessened. This time he can make out a figure sitting in the chair – slightly in the shadows.

‘Dani?’

‘Yes, it’s me.’ DI Bennett leans forward into the light. ‘It’s Danny Bennett. How are you, Tom?’ It’s the first time he has ever used Tom’s first name.

‘Lucy Brindley, is she safe?’

‘Thanks to you she is. Very scared but not hurt.’

‘Oh, thank God.’ Tom feels a wave of relief flood over him. ‘Did you get him?’

Bennett scrunches his face up like he can smell something bad. ‘No. No we didn’t.’

‘Fuck.’

‘But don’t worry, we will.’

‘Do we know why he went to the Brindley-Black home?’

‘Well...’ Bennet half-shrugs. ‘He had locked Lucy in a cupboard, but hadn’t touched her. She said that all he kept asking her about was the book. *On the Road*, and the photograph of Jenifer. She said he was desperate to get it.’

‘Did she give it to him?’

‘No. No she didn’t. She seems quite a stubborn person.’

‘Good. What about his house?’

‘We went there first thing, just like you ordered, and turned it over. We took his wife and two kids into custody.’

‘He’s married?’

‘Pretty wealthy, too. SOCO are in there now, have been all day. We found the doll just like you said, it was in a sealed room behind his home office.’

‘But he’s still free?’

‘For now. But great work, DI Bevans.’

‘Drake stripped me of that, I’m—’

‘The golden boy. You going over Drake’s head to the deputy commissioner worked. Drake was suspended this afternoon pending an internal review. Someone from Yorkshire’s been drafted in to babysit while we see what happens. But you’re the man of the moment.’

You brown-nosing bastard, thinks Tom. But he says, ‘Just as long as Lucy Brindley is safe, that they are all safe.’

In the back of his head Dani sighs.

‘Oh, Tom’ Bennett pulls something from under his chair. ‘We found this at the house, in the sealed room. SOCO have been over it and cleared it for release. I thought you might want—’

‘What is it?’

Bennett looks a little blank. ‘We’re not exactly sure – we thought it might have been a diary at first but . . .’ He hands it over to Tom. ‘I think it’s a novel he was writing.’

Tom traces his fingers across the cover of the book. ‘The Flying Carpet’. He opens it, inside, is page after page of dense spidery scrawl.

‘Thanks, DI Bennett. Good work.’

Bennett smiles, looking pleased. ‘I’ll get off.’ He says as he rises. Tom doesn’t hear – he is already drawn inside the book, can see through the eyes of the killer. There is a car in the drive of a grand house. Underfoot is gravel and the sky is grey and angry.

The Flying Carpet

By George Larkshead

Sunday 19 December 1971

The rope cut deep into my fingers – red trenches that burned. I tried to loop it around, just as Papa Joe had showed me, but my hands didn't work like they were supposed to. I had to peel off the gloves, but the cold quickly stripped my hands of all feeling. They became thick heavy weights dragging down at the ends of my arms. The rain turned to sleet, icy-slush that licked at my face – burning cold on my cheeks. I tried again, and again.

'You fucking bastard . . .' my mother screamed from inside the house and I winced, frightened by her anger. In the car's side-windows, I could see myself reflected: a pale scared boy with large, sad eyes, and a thin mouth that puckered like I'd been sucking lemons. I hardly recognised myself.

' . . . tell it to your fucking whore.' My mother screamed.

I looked through my reflection to the suitcases and bags stacked, thrown and wedged onto the back seat. That was the day we left for good.

' . . . fuck you!'

I looked back to the only home I had known for my twelve years on earth. Behind it, I could see the black smoke curling up into the dying light of the winter's afternoon sky. She had burnt everything of my father's: clothes, books, records – all gone. There was a final scream and I heard the telephone splinter against the wall,

shards of plastic exploded against the glass of the French windows like a sudden rainstorm. The front door opened – she swarmed through it, not bothering to close it behind her, not caring that the rain rushed in to hide there. It was her house no longer, let it spoil. Her long hair was taken by the wind and streamed behind like a kite. Her eyes blazed fiercely; framed by black streaks of mascara that made her seem like a silent movie queen on the rampage. I looked back to the rope and the rug I needed to lash to the roof. I was almost out of time – she would be at the car in seconds.

‘Please . . .’ I begged my useless fingers to work. I tried again to loop the rope, tie a knot but—

‘George.’

‘Mum, I hav—’

‘In the fucking car. Now!’

I folded a loop of string through the other, it had to be tight, but tears froze on my cheek as I yanked with all my might, using fingers that could not feel anything. It tightened a little but was still too loose and flabby.

‘GEORGE!’ She threw open the passenger door, hitting me in the leg. ‘Get in.’

‘The rug isn—’ I began but she drowned me out by turning the key to start the engine. I knew, deep in my heart, that she would leave me there, all alone. I jumped inside.

‘Your fucking father . . .’ She jabbed her foot down hard, the car sprang forward, gravel and grit spat away from the wheels, as the car accelerated out-of-

control down the drive. I gripped the leather seat, felt my fingers come back to life with an explosion of pins and needles. The car slewed towards the gates that led to the outside world, away from our home. On the TV for months they had kept saying clunk-click every trip, use a seatbelt – it saves lives. But our car didn't have one. I remember I desperately wished it had that day. I did not feel safe. Above my head I could hear the carpet scrape on the roof, sliding from side to side, like Harry Houdini loosening his bonds.

'Mum—'

'Not now.' Her eyes burnt as she turned the searchlight of their rage on me. She gripped the steering wheel so tight I thought it would snap. 'Be useful and light me a fucking cigarette.' She said.

Her bag was on the backseat; I had to turn to reach behind me. The wheels clattered on the gravel and I slid on the shiny leather, banging into her arm.

'Be more fucking careful.'

'Sorry.' I remember biting my lip, desperate to keep the tears away, knowing she would hate me all the more for my weakness. I pulled the bag off the back seat, opened it and fished inside for the packet of cigarettes and lighter. When I found them, I took out one of the long white sticks and put it into my mouth. Then I lit it with the lighter and drew some air in – the tip flared red and I coughed.

'Don't be such a bloody baby – you're almost thirteen. I was smoking twenty a day at your age,' she yelled. I wanted to tell her how I hated it, that it made me feel so dirty - but the car hit a pothole and kicked hard to the left. The carpet roared

above my head – I knew I should tell her, make her stop the car and check the roof again. I knew I should... but I was scared.

‘Another useless fucking man,’ she mumbled to herself, but I heard it. She ground her teeth and the accelerator, taking the turn onto the lane at speed – my dad had always stopped there, said it was unsafe to pull out – *blind spot*, he had said. She hadn’t stopped, instead she skidded out through the gates, off the gravel drive and onto the main road. I could smell the rubber and brake pad, acrid in my throat. The carpet rasped above us – sawing back and forth. She heard nothing, lost in her fears of the future and her rage over the past. But the rug sawing away at its bonds was all I could hear.

‘If only the movers hadn’t forgotten it – I would never have needed to roll it up and tie it to the roof.’ I thought. Tight? Was it tight enough? I knew it wasn’t, but I didn’t stop her. Could I, even if I had wanted to? Could I have penetrated the fug of fear that gripped her? I knew she was lost in her own world – reliving the awfulness of it over and over; my father’s words ran through her head non-stop: ‘*I have to move on, I must follow my heart.*’ I knew she despised him and that she had no idea what she would do now. I had heard her sobbing night after night for weeks after my father left. She had often been drunk, self-medicating with vodka and gin. She had told me, her voice all slurred, that he was a *fucker* and that all that exercising, starving herself thin, never denying him anything – it had all been for nothing. She had even given him a child, let herself get fat and disgusting – for what? For what? He had still traded her in for a younger model, some new fertile whore. ‘What the fuck will I do?’ She had cried.

‘Mum.’

She did not hear me, consumed by her fears for the future. I saw something flick across her face that terrified me. I could see that she wanted to wait for a truck to appear on the road ahead, then floor the accelerator. . . just slide into its path and end all this. End all—

‘MUM!’

At the last second she jerked the wheel and stabbed at the brake. There was an impact, a sickening thud and the car spun – on two wheels. My stomach churned, a prayer issued from my mouth unbidden, we were in the air... my ears full of screaming. I didn’t want to die... we crashed back to earth, back on four wheels. We slid for a second and then came to a stop. The air still full of my scream.

‘George. Shut up.’ My mother slapped me, hard. I think she enjoyed it. She turned her head to look through the back window. She saw the deer we had hit, half on the road, half in a ditch. She hoped it was dead, I did too... but then it kicked out and bellowed in pain.

‘Oh fuck. Oh fuck.’

She turned the key – the engine started.

‘Mum.’

‘Quiet, George.’

She slowly reversed. I could see the legs kicking, saw the blood on its front hoof. She aimed the car and . . . we could feel the body beneath the wheels, heard the limbs crack and the skull pop. She drove twenty yards past, then we both looked back. We could see the broken deer, unmoving. Dead. I began to sob.

'Give it a fucking rest, George.'

My mother lit herself a cigarette as we sat there, the engine idling. She greedily smoked it down to the butt and then rolled the window down and threw it out.

'Let's go.' She said and slowly pushed her foot down. We were almost at the motorway, it lay below us, under the exit ramp which wound down like a corkscrew. She took it slowly, her hands shaking a little. At the bottom of the winding path we could see for miles and miles, farmland stretched out before us, brown and wet and ugly. She pulled the car onto the motorway and...

'Mum!'

'Oh Jesus.'

Ground zero, and then it had been my mother's turn to scream. I looked ahead and could see what had happened – what I had done. A car sat in the centre of the motorway – glass sprayed from it like salt scattered on a table. *Clunk-click, clunk-click you should have clunk-clicked. You should have . . .* ran through my head. *You should . . .* And if she had, I thought, her body would not have been thrown through the windscreen.

I opened my door and slid out into the cold, my breath streamed before me. I looked to the roof of our car. At one end the rope was still tied securely, but its cargo had flown. The rope on the other side was frayed and whipped uselessly in the wind, unhitched. My eyes moved from our car to the second car, maybe fifty yards ahead. I could see the deep reds and purples of our rug, still rolled tight, embedded deep in

the passenger seat like an arrow. It had speared through the windscreen, shattering the glass and... she lay in the road, halfway between the pierced car and me.

I began to walk towards her. I felt like I was wading through treacle, I was so scared, so scared about what I would find. Until finally I was level with her and...

'Oh God.' She was beautiful, so beautiful. Her skin was flawless, white like porcelain. Her hair was silver and curled above her like a halo. She looked, to me, like an angel. The windscreen of her car was shattered but I could see no cuts on her. Her eyes were open and... golden. She was perfection. It was a miracle, I thought, she was alive and unhurt. I think in that second I fell in love with her. I moved close and dropped to my knee, by her head. I could see her mouth was moving slightly, slowly almost like a fish, gasping, out of the water. I bent down to her, and she lifted her head fractionally. I put my hand lightly onto her chest – she was wearing a long white mackintosh – it looked Italian and expensive. My hand pushed into it and – oh Jesus... blood flowed. Her blood. It had been trapped in the coat but it began to flow out from her, pooling around her body. I jumped back – seeing the blood pulse and flow... it was beautiful; looked as if she were an angel slowly spreading her wings, about to take flight. Wings of blood. I tugged at the white plastic belt around her waist, the coat opened and I see the deep trench of the bloody gash in her stomach. Her skirt had been slashed open, her legs were perfect – and the small panties . . . Her mouth moved again. I leaned forward, my ear close to her mouth.

'Scared.' She said.

I put my arms around her. In that desolate place – I held her, as her lifeblood flowed away. I knelt in her blood – it lapped at my legs like the tide coming in. I could

feel her breasts against me, her legs against me and... I was aroused. She moaned, softly, sweetly like a lover . . . and her last breath gathered itself in her chest and readied itself to leave. 'Love me.' She said and the dove of her last breath fluttered away. I felt that shudder – the spirit flying from her... then her body was just flesh, un-animated for the first time. I was in rapture.

Tom closes the book. He is tired and his head throbs – he has read enough. He shuts his eyes and the blackness slips in once again.

Fourteen

Wednesday 19 October 1999

Tom Bevans dreams. She is always just ahead of him as he runs – her hand is stretched out to his, she is desperate for him to reach her and pull her out of the darkness. *Daniiiiii*, he screams. Her dark hair whipped by the wind as she hurtles away from him. There is no sound but he sees her mouth: *Tom, Tom, help me. Save me!* Just as he gets to her – as their fingers are about to touch – she speeds further away. The road stretches out and out and . . . she is gone. Gone. Then he sees the crashed car. The shattered glass, the rug – like a spear through the windscreen. He marvels at the sight; it is so colourful in the terrible greyness of the dying day. Her body lies alone, a long way from the car. She is beautiful – so unlike Dani. Silver hair that glows, even in the gloom. Curvaceous, ripe – her mouth full, large eyes like pools of honey. She looks to the sky as if a sister angel will drop to Earth to raise her up. Tom hears the scream, not the girl – the mother. George is suddenly there beside him, he walks forward, kneels down and touches her – the blood pools around her on the road . . .

on the road

on the road

On The Road

He opens his eyes. He knows where George Larkshead is.

Patterson drives, it is a long way. All through the journey he keeps quiet. Tom sits beside him feeling every single knock or pothole in the road. Each one makes him wince, the hole in his

belly yells at him to go back to bed. The doctors insisted he stay – a week at least, they said – but he discharged himself anyway. No one was going to make this arrest but him. At five-thirty that morning he had been at the station, collecting something from the evidence store. The local police were alerted at six a.m and they quickly pinpointed the cabin that had been built eight years before – close to the old slip road that used to lead down to the motorway. Close to where a poorly tied rug sailed off the roof of a car and crashed through the windscreen of another, killing a beautiful young woman. None of the local police had ever heard of the accident. It was twenty-eight years – a lifetime ago, before any of them were born.

They finally arrive at the local police station at 2 p.m. As soon as the car pulls in, it is swamped by the local police and volunteers, all keen to be involved in a real manhunt. Tom introduces himself and makes it clear he only needs half-a-dozen men, the best men. He chooses the four professional officers and two of the less crazy-looking volunteers. Then they all squeeze into two cars and head out. As soon as they leave the station Tom swears he hears the men in the second car start to sing the words to ‘The Self-Preservation Society’.

Tom watches the vista of browns and greys smudge into one as they drive the final twenty minutes. He feels sick to his stomach with the anticipation. The blood is roller-coasting around in his head. He has seen killers before. In court mostly. He has never been in on the kill – not like this. His stomach burns. He looks down and pulls up his shirt, there is a red discharge in the dressing, a rusty ooze of blood. Damn, no time to change it.

Tom turns – painfully – and talks to the two local men on the back seat. Both look like little more than kids wearing policeman dress-up. ‘Tell me just before we get to visual range of the cabin. We need to go in quick and quiet. Okay.’

‘Sir, yes sir.’ They say simultaneously – which is unnerving.

Ten minutes later one of them says, ‘Just around the next bend and we can see it. There’s a half-mile dirt road leading to it. We can drive it or walk.’

‘If we walk, we’ll be sitting ducks if he starts shooting. Is there any cover close to the cabin?’

‘There’s a woodshed about twenty yards from the main building. Quite big,’ one of the locals tells him. They round the corner and Patterson slows to a stop. They can see the cabin and . . .

‘Smoke, there’s some smoke, look he’s in there.’ One of the policemen does a little jig on the backseat – like a toddler needing to pee.

‘This is serious.’ Tom tells him – though it doesn’t feel real. He understands why soldiers in war pretend it’s a game, safer to think you can just regenerate if you get hurt. But the pain that has started to build in his stomach wound is the antidote to that. Wincing, Tom gets out of the car and walks to the second, parked just behind them.

‘On my signal we are going to get to the cabin as fast as we can. If nothing happens – we head straight there and go in as a team. If he fires on us, then there is an outbuilding we head to and regroup. Okay?’ They nod.

Tom gets back into the lead car, next to Paterson. ‘Drive like the wind.’ Patterson floors the accelerator and they squeal forward. Tom imagines he hears ‘The Ride of the Valkyries’ swelling around them. His head is filled with: *Kill da wabbit, kill da wabbit* . . .

. . . a shot explodes the windscreen of the second car.

‘Jesus!’ Patterson shouts.

‘The wood shed,’ yells Tom through the side window.

No one needs to be told a second time. Patterson swerves into cover behind it and the second car crashes into the back of them. ‘Fucking morons!’ Patterson screams.

‘On the radio you two,’ Tom yells to the backseat. ‘Call in a swat team, now.’ Tom gets out and walks to the edge of the shed and looks at the cabin. His skin covered in a sheen of sweat, his stomach is killing him.

‘This is exciting, isn’t it?’ Dani-in-his-head says.

‘No,’ Tom tells her – but he lies. It really is.

‘Swat team won’t be here for at least an hour,’ one of the locals tells him.

Tom looks at the sky. Clouds skirmish above them, it is almost impossible to see where heaven and earth meet. It is all just grey and ugly. He sighs, the afternoon is already ebbing away; it will be dark long before anyone else gets here. George will escape, he knows it. Shit. He slips out of his jacket, then his jumper and shirt until he is topless. It reminds him of something from a long time ago when he last entered into the lair of a criminal to make a deal with the devil.

‘No, Guv,’ Patterson spits.

‘Christ, it’s cold.’ He whispers to himself and then holds *On The Road* up as high as he can, and he walks out from behind the shed – towards the cabin.

He shouts loud as he can. ‘George. George Larkshead, I have something you want. The book and the photo of Jennifer. Let me come in alone. I’m unarmed. Look, you can see.’ *You can see the dressing where you stabbed me. Have another go,* Tom thinks.

‘Fuck, Guv!’ shouts Patterson.

‘Don’t be stupid, Tom. Please don’t get hurt,’ Dani-in-his head pleads.

There is no reply from the cabin but Tom walks slowly towards it, holding the book aloft. When he gets close, the front door opens.

A voice from inside calls out. 'Throw the book inside and then run back to your boys in blue.'

'No.' Tom calls back – his voice level. 'I have questions. Let me come in.'

'Questions?' George laughs ruefully. Nothing more is said and Tom continues to walk until he gets to the door. He immediately smells the petrol; it stops him dead. He should run, hell is inside this cabin. This is death.

'Tom. I love you. Please don't go inside.'

'Quiet, Dani,' he tells her. Then he draws a big breath into his lungs and steps through the doorway.

It is dark, low-ceilinged with only one small shuttered window. It takes a second or two for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. His lungs are starting to strain so he breathes again.

'Oh fuck.' He whispers – the fumes make him queasy. He wants to vomit.

The cabin is pretty bare – a sofa, single chair and table are all he can see, and that is only in outline. Then something moves. He can make out the figure of George, sitting at the table, his rifle propped up against it. Tom walks forward and . . . 'Christ!' The sofa, chair and table are doused in petrol – they are dripping with it. Then George leans forward, into a thin strip of light from the door and Tom sees that he has poured the rest of the can over his own head.

'Welcome, DI Bevans. You look upset.'

'That's just my face, I always look like this. Miserable.' Tom tries to smile.

George nods. 'Where is my photograph?' He reaches out a hand, his sleeve is soaked with petrol that drips over the table. The smell makes Tom retch, luckily there is nothing in there to come out. He reaches his arm out to full stretch, and Larkshead takes *On the Road* from him. He opens it and removes the picture. He kisses it. 'Oh, this is yours.' He flicks something up in the air. Tom catches it – the *ban the bomb* badge he had stabbed George's hand with – his good-luck charm. It had saved his life.

'Thanks. It has sentimental value too.'

'I gave you that,' Dani whispers.

Tom slips the badge in his pocket. 'I spoke to Maarten Meyer.'

'Huh.' George does not look up at Tom, instead his eyes are focused on the image of Jennifer Brindley. 'I thought he'd be dead by now.'

'He made you a doll.'

'He made me Jennifer.' His eyes mist over and he is somewhere else, trapped in the amber of the past – remembering how she felt that first time he kissed her.

'You showed him the body of a girl you killed?'

George looks up, tears stream down his face. Tom has no idea if they are for the poor girl whose life he ended or for the damn doll.

'I showed him. She was dead, I begged him to help me. I didn't want to kill again, didn't want to hurt anyone but I—'

'He made you something to love?'

'Love?' Dani asks.

‘Exactly, I knew you would understand me. I could see it in your face, in your eyes. That’s why I let you in – you understand, don’t you.’ George asks him hopefully.

Tom tries not to wince at his words.

‘You understand, don’t you, my Sad Man.’ He hears Dani echo through his head.

‘I needed his help, he was a wonderful talent, all of Amsterdam talked of him. All I had to do was show him this photograph. It was in her car, I found it that day.’

‘You went through her things?’

‘She wanted me to. She asked me to love her – and I did. I cut a lock of her hair too. The colour was unique, I had to keep it... and it was lucky that I did. That was how Mr Meyer got the match so perfectly when he made me a new Jennifer.’

Tom hears a sound from outside the cabin. Patterson and the other men are getting as close as they can. He hopes to god they don’t try and rush in. George seems to hear nothing, just stares at the photograph.

‘That was almost twenty years ago.’ Tom says.

‘And I still love her. She is still my friend and partner.’

‘You’re married. You married a woman – a live breathing woman.’

‘Claire, yes. I married Claire eight years ago. A nice woman. She knows nothing about this. She never met Jennifer.’

‘You have two sons.’

‘Six and four. Andrew and Ian. Great boys.’

Tom shakes his head. ‘Why?’ Such a simple word.

‘Don’t I have the right to a life? I just wanted a normal life. Wife and kids.’

‘Normal? You had killed three women already.’

‘I had put all of that awfulness behind me. Do you have a family?’

Tom feels suddenly empty. He can’t reply, he just shakes his head.

‘I am sorry. You are missing out on so much.’

Tom feels anger spike, his cheeks flush. ‘I don’t have that so I am free to protect people from the likes of bastards like you.’

George shrinks away from the anger, he looks like he will cry. ‘I didn’t . . .’ He sniffs, tears sprout around his eyelids. ‘I didn’t choose my life – I never chose to meet Jennifer, not like that. It was a dreadful, dreadful accident.’

‘You’ve killed four women.’ He hits the table with his fist and the gun topples – Tom sees it fall and strike the stone floor. A spark – flames engulf them, there are screams . . . but the gun falls against George’s leg and stays there. No spark. Tom feels his hands shake. *Calm down!*

‘I think about those women every day. I regret what I did, I was young and stupid. I changed after that, after Mr Meyer gave me Jennifer. I didn’t want that kind of . . . I didn’t need the women.’

‘And yet you killed Charlie Brindley-Black.’

His mouth moves but no sound comes out. George Larkshead slowly bends forward and then, like a marionette whose strings have been cut – he falls forward onto the table and begins to sob. Instinctively, Tom moves to comfort him – but stops. The petrol pools around him, mixing with the tears.

‘George – George, we need to leave this room. Do you hear me?’

He says something but Tom can barely hear him. He leans closer.

‘ . . . happy, happy with my family. Claire was my friend, the boys loved me – we played football together. Like my dad did with me when I was young . . . before . . . I was lucky – I had survived and come through, life was good. I was happy, I loved my work – was a master carpenter. But I saw her one day, and it all changed. It was back, the hunger in me – like I was twelve again.’

‘You saw Charlie?’

‘Totally by chance. I never go to London, but there I was, close to the gallery she ran, and hungry. I was going to get a sandwich and then get the train home. Another minute and I would have missed her and life would have just gone on and on and not . . . But I saw her. I walked into the gallery and asked her name, asked about her family and... very quickly realised who she was.’

Tom sees Patterson at the window – they lock eyes, Tom slowly shakes his head, not wanting to alarm George. *Do not storm the room*, his eyes blaze to the other officer. He hopes Patterson understands.

‘ I knew she was there, knew who she was, I couldn’t stop. Couldn’t think of anything else but the way Jennifer died and how it made me feel. She died in my arms, you know.’

‘You had Charlie dye her hair?’

‘I needed her to, she had to become Jennifer.’

‘How did you persuade her?’

‘It was easy, I told her I was making a film, that we had been looking for months for the right woman. It was a biopic of a human rights leader – and then I showed her the photo of her own aunt. That was her, I said. She didn’t recognise Jennifer, didn’t know she had an aunt who died before she was born, her mother had kept her ignorant. She asked to keep the photo for a day or two. I didn’t want to do that, I always had the photo with me – but I had to say yes, as long as she showed no one. I also gave her a lock of Jennifer’s hair to match the colour. I asked her to keep it a secret from her mother. I told her she could reveal the truth on the Friday, when her mother was back from a trip . . . but there were no Fridays left for her.’

‘And Lucy Brindley, what did you plan for her?’

‘Nothing. I wanted my photograph back, that’s all. Charlie had forgotten it the day we met – her last day. I missed it – I needed it. I have no interest in Lucy or Helena. I have no interest in anyone, DI Bevans. I am done.’ He pulls matches from his pocket.

‘Run, Tom, RUN!’ Dani screams.

‘Christ, George. Think straight,’ Tom pleads.

He looks up into Tom’s eyes. ‘Do you have any idea what it feels like to know death? To hold a body as the soul takes flight? Feel God himself reap? When Jennifer died all those years ago I touched God – through her, I transcended.’ His face lights up with the memory of it.

‘And Charlie?’

The light in his eyes dies. He withers before Tom’s gaze. ‘I held her while she bled to death – the same as her aunt and . . . there was nothing. Just death. Just a sordid little death.’ He takes a match from its box and holds it to the side, ready to strike.

Tom looks into his eyes – they are blank, he is prepared for the end. The match is moving – ‘The knot. The lark’s head. Why that name?’ Tom grasps at a straw.

‘My grandfather showed me how to tie it, when I was a kid – before he died. He was in the merchant navy a long, long time ago. I was really proud to have mastered it.’ George’s hands stop moving, but match and box are touching. He is lost in his memories for a moment – Tom can almost see them coalesce around his head like carrion birds ready to rip his corpse to shreds. Tom moves towards him...

‘Keep back!’ George yells at him. ‘Don’t let me warn you again, policeman.’

‘George, let’s leave here and talk this over.’

‘I am not leaving.’ Suddenly a beatific expression sweeps across his face. Tom imagines that he’s seeing Jennifer, his angel, on the road again.

‘I’m sorry I cut you DI Bevans, but if you want to live, you should run.’

‘Don’t.’ Dani-in-his-head screams.

George strikes the match, it blazes – Tom remembers his old chemistry teacher setting fire to Bunsen burners to scare the kids. The match arcs away, as George throws it into the petrol-sodden sofa. If he had dropped it straight down, his body would have burned immediately – but he didn’t. It gives Tom a chance. He leaps forward and grabs George in a bear hug, lifting him up off the chair – Tom feels his stitches burst and blood surges through the dressing once more. Flames leap up – Tom drops George’s body as the pain flares in his side. He can’t carry that weight but he can drag him. With supreme effort he pulls the body towards the door as flames lap his face – George is a fireball.

‘Don’t save me – don’t, please.’ George screams. Tom feels his hair start to burn – he closes his eyes and pushes ahead, it is only a few paces. He hits the door with George’s body, the air hits the flame – the petrol burns Tom’s hands. The whole world screams. They are down and rolling, over and over – dirt strangling flames, others leaping up in new places. Only one voice screams now – his.

‘GUV!’ In seconds Patterson is on him beating the flames away, then other men are there too and an extinguisher. ‘You idiot, you bloody idiot. Why risk it – to save that piece of shit.’

Tom is a ball of pain, he doesn’t know up from down – all he knows is he had to try to save George Larkshead from killing himself. He knows something about atonement. He knows that everyone deserves to be saved – we all need a second chance. Then there is no more as Tom is unconscious.

After

The press loved him. Both the deputy and Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police went on record saying he was the new bred of policeman – the future of British policing. An idealist in a senior post – it was ground-breaking. Chief Superintendent Drake took early retirement with a particularly fat golden handshake. DI Ashe never returned to active service and George Larkshead was convicted and given three life sentences. He will never leave prison. His wife and children changed their names and disappeared, three tabloid newspapers have bounties on their heads but they will never be found. Valerie Brindley-Black sold her gallery and left London to move in with her sister. He hopes that together, they will keep their loneliness at bay. But what of him? What of Tom Bevans? His side has almost healed – he will be left with a small scar. His hands have healed too, soon there will be nothing to see.

‘We did it, Tom.’ Her voice is back in his head.

‘No, Dani,’ he says tenderly.

‘What? We solved it and got you promoted – your own unit. What you’ve wanted for years.’

Tom looks around at the empty open-plan office. Within six months it will be the hub of his new special operations unit. He has named it Operation Ares. The god of war, the god of fruitless violence and false masculinity, a coward who kills for the sake of killing. Operation Ares will hunt the men who kill and hurt the girls. They will find them and punish them. Finally he can try to keep his promises to the dead girls.

‘Like me?’

‘Oh, Dani,’ he tells the air, ‘I can’t do this any more.’

‘What? Now we can make a real difference. We’re a team. Bevans and Lancing, deceased.’

‘You’re just in my head.’

‘I’m Dani.’

‘You’re just someone to talk to.’

‘But you love me.’

‘I do. I love you, Dani Lancing, always have and always will, but you’re dead. I can’t keep talking to you.’

‘But—’

‘It’s the end. Goodbye, Dani.’

She’s gone.

He reaches for his mug. *World’s Greatest Dad*. He looks around the operations room and knows, deep inside, that he will never lay her place at the table again, or ask her opinion on what colour something should be. But he also knows he will still dream of her, still yearn for her, still visit the garden of remembrance to read Keats to her. But she is dead. He feels so lonely; his heart is so cold.

He sits down at a desk and starts to go through files. He needs to find officers for his new team. Not political, not bean-counting – officers that truly want to serve and protect. He opens files. He likes the look of this pathologist, he will interview him, and a female DI who looks tough. They will be his team, his family and friends. He smiles. He finally feels like he has come home.