

APPROVED. VERIFIED. DEADLY.

CLEARANCE RECORD

STATUS: APPROVED

IDENTITY: VERIFIED

AUDIT: REDACTED

ROUTE DATA: LIVE



VOID

THE

**GREEN
TICK**

The paperwork was perfect.
The people were expendable.

PAUL WATSON

The Green Tick

Paul Watson

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ONE

Andy turned into the narrow alley off Rose Street, letting a knot of teenagers shove past him as if he were part of the brickwork. London had its summer smell on: crushed flowers, warm tarmac and the sour breath of drains waiting underneath.

He ducked through the pub door, bought a pint of Werrels Red Snapper and came back outside to stand behind the red rope. The beer was cold, bitter and perfect. He drank half of it before he saw Steve on the far side of the barrier.

'Hello mate, the roads from the airport were busy.'
Steve faced Andy from the other side of the rope.

Andy sipped his beer. 'Great to see you, buddy.'

Steve grinned, the same reckless grin Andy remembered from years earlier, the one that made bad ideas feel harmless. Briefly, the week loosened from Andy's shoulders: Steve was here, the beer was cold and London had given them a warm evening.

Steve checked his phone before he stepped through the rope, smiled at a photograph Andy could not see: a small boy in a school jumper, cheeks flushed from being ill and grinning anyway. Steve locked the smile away. 'Tommy's been ill all week,' he said. 'Nikki says he is

better, which probably means he waited until I left the country before recovering.'

Andy smiled because Steve needed him to. Tommy was still young enough for illness to mean temperature, sleep and school on Monday. Max had once been that age too, before every conversation with him became something Andy rehearsed and then avoided.

Max used to send one-word messages from upstairs when his throat hurt: water, charger, Mum. Andy had kept one for months because it was easier to save a message than answer the boy behind it. He had deleted it during a phone clean-up and still remembered the panic afterwards, as if he had thrown away evidence.

Andy had told himself distance was what Max wanted. It had become a convenient theory: leave the door open, wait for the boy to come down, call patience parenting. The theory thinned every time he repeated it.

At the mouth of the alley, a yellow mountain bike rested against the kerb with no lock through the frame. Its rider stood beside it, hood up, one hand on the bars and the other on his phone. He looked once at Steve's cabin bag, then away too quickly for Andy to decide whether he had seen anything at all.

'I'll get you a refill.'

Andy finished his drink and traded his empty glass for Steve's cabin bag; Steve walked into the bar.

The yellow mountain bike moved as soon as Steve disappeared into the bar. The rider swung out from the corner with dirty-blond hair, a grey hoodie, a facemask and no helmet.

Andy noticed the contradiction before the danger: filtered air, unprotected skull. The kind of oddity Steve would laugh about later, if a later.

The bike hit him square on and drove him backwards through the rope. The rider did not grab at Andy's pockets, phone or wallet. His hand went straight to Steve's cabin bag. Andy was only in the way.

Andy bounced to his feet and grabbed the bike under the seat post.

'Don't think so mate.'

The cyclist slammed the back of his head into Andy's nose. Pain flashed white; adrenaline followed. Andy locked both arms around the rider's upper body and squeezed until the man's elbows were pinned uselessly to his ribs.

'How romantic,' said Steve, who emerged with the drinks.

'Call the police.'

Steve complied and then helped his friend hold the thief.

The police arrived in a car and a van. A street robbery with a wanted suspect was worth taking properly, but Friday evening had already begun to thin the response:

two disorder calls, a missing child at Covent Garden, a custody suite running on agency cover and a stabbing report that had not yet found its shape. A young officer in her early twenties strode towards them.

'What happened?'

'This lad smashed his bike into me and tried to make off with the bag.'

'Is this true Jake?'

Jake said nothing.

He did not look at the police car. He looked past it, towards the mouth of the alley, then towards Steve's cabin bag on the pavement. For the first time, Andy saw fear rather than defiance on his face.

When Amy said custody, Jake's jaw tightened. He looked at Steve's bag again, then at the alley mouth.

Two male police officers took hold of the kid. One was thickset with greying temples and cauliflower ears, and the other was pale and skinny.

'Hi Amy,' they said to the female officer.

Amy took off Jake's facemask, arrested him and cuffed him. The police officers put Jake in the van.

'Amy, can you book him in? Jamie and me can take statements.'

'No problem, Rob.' Amy hopped into the van. The driver waited while Rob checked the radio traffic, then pulled away towards custody.

Rob, the thickset officer, turned to Andy, 'Well done holding Jake until we got here, he weighs as much as a flea, but he's a nasty piece of work.'

'He was wriggling and wrestling and had huge strength for a tiny man.'

'Jake's wanted on warrant, so you've done us a favour holding on to him.'

'Do you want me to take statements Rob?' said Jamie, the pale and skinny policeman.

'Yes please, start with these men and then see if you can get details of a few witnesses too. I'll see what CCTV we can find.'

Andy sat with Jamie at a table outside the bar and gave his account. Jamie did not write fast. He asked Andy to start again from the moment Steve handed him the cabin bag, then again from the point at which the bicycle appeared. Each time the same details came back: yellow bike, grey hoodie, no helmet, facemask, Steve's bag rather than Andy's wallet.

Jamie turned the page over and drew a rough square for the pavement, the rope line and the bike's path. 'Don't worry about sounding repetitive,' he said. 'Repetition is useful if it stays the same.'

Jamie had already stopped thinking of it as a clean street robbery. The route, the bag and the way Jake kept looking past the police car gave the incident a shape he did not like.

He glanced once at Jake in the back of the van. The kid had stopped twisting now. He sat very still, watching the bag rather than the officers.

Across the rope, Steve had already found two women in their early thirties, both drinking Prosecco and laughing at something he had said. One of the women pointed towards the mouth of the alley, then mimed a cyclist swerving too late. The other checked her phone for the time of the first photo she had taken of the street, more interested in being accurate than helpful-looking.

'Your mate's a ladies man. I'll get him after the witnesses.' Jamie wrote Andy's mobile number, which ended in the three digits 999, then paused over the last line. 'Anything in the bag worth nicking? Laptop? Cash? Work papers?'

'Not mine. Steve's cabin bag.'

Jamie looked over at Steve, then at the bike. 'Then I need his version before he forgets the boring bits. Boring bits are usually where the useful bits hide.'

Jamie lifted his pen towards Steve. 'Before I lose you, did anyone else handle the bag between the carousel and here? Even for a second?' Steve opened his mouth to answer.

Jamie kept his pen above the page and waited.

His phone buzzed against his vest. Amy: Milk. Not garage-is-shut milk, actual milk. Jamie smiled, typed Coward, then left it unsend as the radio tone cut across

the alley.

A loud beep burst from Jamie's radio. The tone was not the routine chatter of a busy borough; it was the one that made every officer within reach look up.

'Urgent assistance required in the front foyer, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, he's stabbed me,' said the voice from the radio.

'Gotta go. We'll be in touch.'

Rob ran from the bar and climbed into the driver's seat. Blue lights flooded the pavement. Jamie hesitated for one second, looking at the unfinished page in his notebook, the mountain bike still lying by the rope and the cabin bag Steve had not yet opened. Then the radio crackled again, sharper this time, and Jamie moved. He tore the page free, pushed it into Andy's hand and jumped in beside Rob. The Astra barked its horn at two men blocking the road before shooting away towards Drury Lane.

Andy held the half-finished statement in his hand. His own handwriting was nowhere on it. Jamie's last question sat at the bottom of the page with no answer after it: Anything in the bag worth nicking?

Andy tried to fold the page into his pocket, but the crease stopped under Jamie's question. Steve was still trying to charm the evening back into an anecdote; across the rope, strangers had already begun talking over the bike as if it were street furniture. The yellow frame stayed on its side by the kerb, front wheel turned

towards the road. People stepped around it without looking down.

Andy rejoined Steve as the two women drifted off, still smiling. For half a minute, neither of them said anything useful. Steve rubbed his wrist where the thief had twisted against him; Andy dabbed at his nose with the back of his hand and looked at Jamie's torn notebook page. The last unfinished question sat there in blue ink. Anything in the bag worth nicking? Then he saw the glossy card near the bike, half-hidden by a chair leg. He picked it up and turned it over.

A wet beer mat had stuck to Steve's glass. Andy peeled it away and dropped it on the table.

Steve looked towards the yellow bike, still lying where Jake had left it. 'If he wanted the bag, why leave the bike?' he said. Andy watched a taxi nudge through the mouth of the alley and tried to make the question smaller. A thief who panicked might abandon a bike. The other answer would not stay ordinary.

Andy tried to make the scene shrink back into a story he could tell later: a drunk cyclist, a tourist bag, the wrong corner of London at the wrong moment. Then his eyes returned to the bike and the question Jamie had not finished asking.

'You've dropped a passport photo mate.'

'It's not mine, I've not had my passport renewed for a few years.'

TWO

Rob and Jamie reached the theatre first. Rob braked hard, killed the engine and siren, but left the rear reds and roof lights flashing. Heat rolled off the pavement as they joined Gary outside the entrance.

Jamie saw his colleague, Gary, talking to a man in a white Panama hat. Gary had removed his stab vest, and his shirt was open, revealing a small cut on his flabby abdomen.

'I'm all right. The knife got stuck in the plates of my vest, it still got through and nicked me though. Serious knife, and he used a hell of a lot of force; have you got a weapons tube in the car?'

Gary held up the knife. Jamie recognised the pattern before he studied the blade: thick-backed, sharpened to a lethal edge, serrated near the handle. Army issue, or close enough to worry about.

'All right mate, you're doing great,' said Jamie. 'We'll find him and go through the rest later. Where did he go?'

'I stopped him on the street as I'd seen him an hour ago in the same spot. I was just going to chat to him to find what he was up to, but he's not chatty I guess. He pushed through the crowd going into the theatre.'

Gary touched the front of his torn shirt and winced. 'He kept checking his phone, then the theatre doors, then the phone again. Not like a punter. Like he was waiting for a collection that hadn't turned up.'

Gary nodded towards the side doors. 'He wasn't watching the stage posters. He watched the staff entrance and the delivery lobby. Every time someone with a lanyard came out, he checked his phone again.'

'Description?'

'White male, early thirties, 5 feet 10, he was wearing long orange shorts.'

'The ambulance is on its way Gary, but it looks like a scratch, the weapons tubes are in the boot,' said Rob, and he gave Gary the car keys. 'Jamie cover the front exit; no one in or out. I'll go around the back: firearms are on their way, along with everyone else.'

Jamie took the front doors and stood under the canopy, grateful for the strip of shade.

Inside, the foyer gleamed: black and white tiles, glass chandelier, ornate ceiling. Theatre-goers bunched at the doors while officers tried to feed them into a cordon. A front-of-house manager kept saying they could not shut the main doors with half the audience pressing through them; panic would be worse than movement. For twenty seconds nobody owned the exits. Then Jamie saw the orange shorts moving down the wide staircase.

The suspect stopped, saw Jamie, and turned back towards the first floor. Jamie shoved through the crowd and sprinted for the stairs.

‘I’m in pursuit of a suspect,’ said Jamie. He ran up the stairs and bounded around the corner, pushing off the wall to change direction through 180 degrees.

‘That’s all received, keep up the commentary Jamie.’

‘Suspect ahead at the end of the corridor, first floor landing, about twenty metres away; he’s gone through a door on the left.’ Jamie reached the door and kicked it open; there was no one there. He was at the base of a concrete spiral staircase, newer than the rest of the theatre. A sign fixed to the wall instructed: ‘Roof access only, no access to the public.’

‘I’m going up a set of stairs. Looks like roof access. Call the helicopter if available.’

‘That’s received. India 99, are you available to look? Last known Drury Lane roof access,’ said the voice at the other end of Jamie’s radio.

‘This is India 99. We’re airborne over the West End on another tasking. We can divert for a look.’

Jamie kept climbing. Thirty seconds later he reached a small landing and a green fire door. He drove the heel of his boot into the push bar. The door flew open and London’s rooftops spread out beneath a hard blue sky.

I could jump but would I fall through the roof?

Jamie noticed the knife man, standing at the edge of the platform, to his right.

Perhaps he's thinking the same thing.

The sound of rotor blades preceded the sight of the police chopper above them.

'This is I99, we've got the suspect and an officer in view on the roof. The suspect has nowhere to go.' The man in orange shorts heard the message blast out of Jamie's radio, and he stared at the only exit, the door behind Jamie.

The man in orange shorts ran for the door. Jamie shifted aside and tried to stop him rather than fight him. They collided shoulder to shoulder in the narrow space by the push bar.

Jamie hit him under the nose because there was no time for anything more elegant. The man staggered, grabbed for the rail and missed. Jamie caught fabric briefly, not enough to hold a frightened man with all his weight moving the wrong way.

The suspect dropped, bounced off the edge of the platform and slid through a gap in the railings. Jamie heard the crack below before he saw the hole in the lower roof. His fingers still held a scrap of orange cloth.

Rob's voice spoke through the radio. 'They've called me up to the lighting booth on the first floor. I need urgent medical help. I also need CID.'

Jamie looked back at the roof edge. The man in orange shorts had come here with a knife, run as if he knew the building, checked exits like a man whose timetable had collapsed, then fallen before he could be questioned. Downstairs, Rob was calling for medical help and CID. The roof wind moved through the broken rail while Jamie tried to slow his breathing.

THREE

Andy studied the glossy card. It was larger than a passport photo, and newer. On the reverse, handwritten in neat black ink, were eight characters: FR006436. He laid it on Jamie's torn page, beside the question about the bag, and turned it until the writing sat straight. 'Let me see your passport, Steve.'

Steve reached into his side pocket and pulled out a small maroon-coloured booklet; on its front, embossed in gold, stood a crowned lion opposite a chained unicorn.

Steve handed the passport to Andy, who thumbed over the first two pages until he came to the photo page.

Andy placed the photo found on the street next to it.

'The photos are identical. The passport is years old, but this photo we've found is new.'

Andy turned the photo over again to reveal the numbers.

'No match with the passport number.' Andy closed the booklet and passed it back to Steve. 'It's weird mate. Maybe you should go to the police?'

'Look at that. The numbers match.'

They stared at the passport. About two-thirds of the way down the maroon booklet, to the right and at an angle

was a sticker; it had a yellow panel at the top and a white area at the bottom.

On the yellow panel were the words MANUAL BAG TAG. On the white panel, in light grey type, were the characters FR 006436: the same reference written on the back of the photograph.

‘Strange. Which airport did you fly from?’

‘I was on the plane from Dublin this afternoon.’

‘Did you meet anyone odd?’

‘There was one man in arrivals waiting by the luggage carousel. The odd thing is, my bag had already been pulled aside before the belt started moving. Staff said the airline tag had torn in Dublin, but the tear looked clean to me, like it had been sliced. They put one of those manual tags on it, and the bloke beside me watched the number being written down as if that was what he had come to see. When the bag finally came round, he grabbed the handle before I could reach it. I took it off him and rushed through the green channel.’

Steve rubbed his thumb along the torn airline tag. ‘The weird thing is the timing. The man at the carousel wasn’t surprised the bag was missing; he looked annoyed it hadn’t already been handed to him. Like he had a slot to keep and the slot had slipped.’

‘There was a clipboard too,’ Steve said. ‘Not airline staff. Different jacket. He kept checking a printed sheet against the odd-sized bags, then gave up when a

supervisor came over. I thought he was from a courier company.'

Andy laid the photograph on the damp table and placed the passport beside it. He moved the beer mat away, wiped a circle of condensation with his sleeve and lined up the eight characters on the back of the photo with the grey type on the manual tag.

Steve stopped smiling. The expression did not fall from him all at once; it went in layers, joke first, then colour, then the practised ease Andy had known for years. Andy turned the cabin bag so the torn airline label faced the light. The rip was too clean at one end, a straight nick before the paper had given way. He tried to picture a baggage belt doing that and failed.

'Ring the airline desk,' Andy said.

Steve called the number printed on the torn tag. He got hold music, then a recorded apology, then a woman who asked for the reference twice and sounded surprised by the answer on her screen. The manual entry showed Heathrow, not Dublin. The damaged tag note showed Dublin. A release field showed Heathrow again, but it sat behind a service-desk code she said she could not open from the public line. She could not see who had entered it, only that the bag had been marked for release to a handler and then corrected.

Steve asked the woman to check the audit trail properly, not just the screen in front of her. She put him on hold. The pub noise filled the gap: glasses landing in crates, a

laugh too loud from the next table, a taxi horn on the street. Andy watched the manual tag while the recorded music played through Steve's phone. The eight characters sat there, ordinary as a coat-check ticket, refusing to become more interesting because he stared.

Steve held the phone away from his ear and smiled at nothing, the old performance trying to stay in place while the hold music chewed through it. Andy had seen him talk his way out of trouble before; this was different. The charm had nowhere to land.

When the woman returned, she sounded less certain. The release had been keyed at a service desk, then corrected forty-three seconds later by someone using a different staff number. She could not give names over the phone and would need airport security to unlock the full audit trail. She could email a reference to Steve if he confirmed the booking postcode. Steve did. The email did not arrive.

Andy heard the small bureaucratic split in it: one screen saying damaged in Dublin, another saying released at Heathrow, a third promising a security review nobody at the pub could see.

'Is that normal?' Andy asked when Steve repeated it. Steve asked the woman. She gave the kind of pause people give when the answer is no but the script has not allowed for no. 'It happens with damaged tags,' she said at last. 'It shouldn't happen twice.'

Steve opened the airline email when it finally arrived. It was worse than nothing: one booking reference, one apology for the inconvenience and a line saying the matter had been referred to airport security. No name. No staff number.

A receipt from the first round curled in the damp beside the passport. Andy moved it twice before accepting it was only a receipt.

A minute later a second message arrived with a security reference and a promise that the discrepancy had been logged. Steve turned the phone so Andy could see the number. Andy wrote it on the back of Jamie's torn page anyway, pressing hard enough for the pen to mark the table beneath.

The pub returned to its own Friday rhythm: ice dropped into glasses, a chair scraped, someone complained about the heat. Andy kept the page flat under his palm and waited for the noise to make the number less important. It did not.

Andy made Steve empty his pockets properly this time. Boarding pass, baggage receipt, passport, phone. He set them out in a square on the table. The baggage receipt matched the torn airline strip. The manual tag matched the photograph. The staff correction sat in the email like a closed door.

Max used to line things up when he was anxious: batteries, coins, old screws from Andy's toolbox. Andy had teased him for it once and regretted the joke for

years. Now the habit had become his own: put the objects in order, then look again.

The pub manager tried the CCTV remote while they waited. The screen behind the bar asked for a password. He tried his birthday, the brewery code and the word landlord, then stopped before the system locked him out. On the frozen image above the till, the alley mouth was hidden behind the black edge of an awning. It confirmed only the most useless fact: the camera existed.

'This might still be an airport admin mess,' Steve said. He wanted Andy to agree, and hated himself for needing it. Andy looked at the sticker, the photograph and the unfinished police statement.

A man in a dark delivery jacket paused by the pub window, thumb moving over his phone. Andy noticed him only because the man looked at the open cabin bag before looking at the street. Then a bus eased between them and he was gone.

Andy did not answer. He set the passport, the torn label and the photograph in a line. The eight characters made the table feel smaller.

Andy looked at the mouth of the alley. A bus sighed at the corner. Two men in office shirts argued over a taxi receipt. Nothing in the street had changed.

'Shall we look inside the bag?'

Steve did not answer. Rose Street filled the silence: glass bins, laughter, a bus sighing at the corner. Andy wanted the bag open and did not want it open.

Steve put his fingers on the zip pull and stopped. He looked past Andy at the empty space where the police car had been. Both men waited for a uniform to return and tell them which rule applied.

Andy checked the half-finished statement again. Jamie had written the time, the place, the bike, the bag, then left a question hanging below them. Andy took a photograph of the page before the drizzle of beer and condensation could blur it. Steve watched him do it and said nothing.

Steve zipped the bag closed again without looking inside. Briefly, that felt like the grown-up decision. Wait for the police. Wait for the airline. Wait for somebody whose job description covered odd photographs and numbered luggage tags. Then Steve's phone buzzed with a withheld number, rang twice and stopped. No voicemail followed.

Steve stared at the blank phone. Andy wanted to unzip the bag, photograph every object and give the police something more than a feeling. The safer part of him wanted to wait for someone with gloves, forms and authority. Jamie's last question sat between them with no one left to answer it.

FOUR

The police van approached the barrier, and the driver parked in the yard. A skinny man, smoking a cigarette, leaned on a wire cage; a uniformed officer stood next to him.

Amy climbed from the van and opened its rear door; Jake sat on the small bench.

'Let's go Jake.' Amy took hold of his arm. Jake stepped from the van. It was still hot outside, and Amy dreaded spending the next few hours inside with no air conditioning.

As a probationer, Amy was glad of the arrest. A street robbery was a useful tick on her record. Even so, part of her still wanted the van keys, an open window and another hour of sunlight before the late shift turned sour.

Amy pushed open the door to the metal cage, and Jake walked in, followed by Amy and the van driver. They stepped into a room with a blue vinyl floor; the familiar smells of stale lager and dead skin hung in the air.

A large desk stood at the entrance to the custody suite; two sergeants sat behind computer terminals. The one to the left had a bald head and his mouth set in a thin horizontal line; he sat ramrod upright in his chair,

unblinking.

In front of this sergeant stood a girl around 16 years old, wearing white trainers. A red handbag sat on the counter and a police officer poured out the contents and stuffed them into a plastic bag.

‘One phone, one lipstick.’

The sergeant on the right drank from a mug that resembled a tin of baked beans. He had a wide grin, short silver hair and a chest as full as a tree trunk.

‘Next customer please.’

Amy approached his desk.

‘Hi Sarge, I arrested this man for attempted robbery at 19.15 outside the Lamb and Flag pub, Rose Street. He tried to steal a backpack from a man drinking outside the pub.’

‘How’s he been Amy, do we need the bracelets?’

‘No, he’s OK.’ Amy pulled a bunch of keys from her pocket, and unlocked the cuffs on Jake’s wrist.

‘I’m authorising your detention to obtain evidence by questioning,’ the sergeant said to Jake. ‘Would you like to call a solicitor?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Any property Amy?’

‘Just this backpack Sarge.’ Amy placed the small blue backpack on the counter.

'Nice phone Jake,' said the sergeant as Amy decanted the contents of the pack; Jake didn't smile.

'Just papers Sarge.' Amy put the paper into a property bag along with the phone; she sealed the bag and signed it.

'Right, fingerprints and then DNA please Amy.'

'You know the way Jake.'

Jake shivered. He was pale and clammy. 'I need my meds.' He swallowed and lowered his voice. 'Before he gets here.'

Amy turned back. 'Before who gets here?' Jake opened his mouth, but the custody phone rang again and the sergeant was already pointing at the screen.

'He's already logged as attending,' the sergeant said. His phone rang before he finished the sentence. He trapped it between shoulder and ear, listened, rolled his eyes and pointed at the screen for Amy to read. The regular FME had gone to Holborn. The rota company had pushed a replacement through ten minutes earlier, the same way they had twice that month when Westminster borrowed their doctor. Cell 3 still needed drink-drive bloods. The girl with the red handbag had started crying again.

Amy glanced at the custody screen. DOCTOR ROBERTS sat beside the job number. A green tick showed against vetting. Under it were a locum provider reference, an emailed photograph and a note from the outer gate: ID

CHECKED. The photograph matched well enough on a poor screen, but the angle was different from the gate camera and the left cheek sat in shadow. Amy frowned at it briefly longer than the sergeant did. The provider reference matched the format she had seen before. The sergeant clicked accept with the same finger he used to mute the ringing phone.

Amy asked whether Roberts had attended their suite before. The sergeant shook his head without looking away from the ringing phone. 'Not here. Westminster last month, according to the provider. That's as much as the system gives us.'

Amy clicked the provider reference and waited for the side panel to load. The system gave her a number, a booking time and a green line of text: PRE-CLEARED BY PROVIDER. She dialled the number from the custody phone anyway. The call rang five times, transferred to a queue, then played hold music so thin it sounded like it came from inside the handset. The sergeant pointed at Cell 3 and mouthed bloody. Amy lifted one finger to say she was still checking. The girl with the red handbag started crying again, the drunk in the corridor kicked his cell door, and control called to ask whether the drink-drive bloody had been taken. Amy kept the receiver to her ear for another ten seconds before hanging up.

The custody guidance laminated beside the monitor did not require a second call once the portal showed a live provider booking and the gate had checked ID. It

advised one if anything looked wrong. Amy stared at the word advised and hated how much room it gave a busy room to move on.

She looked for a previous-attendance tab and found only a blank grey box. No visits recorded for this station. No visits refused either. Absence meant nothing.

'Gate says he's here,' the sergeant said. He looked at Amy, then at the queue light still blinking on the phone. 'We have ID, provider clearance and a live custody need. Make a note you attempted the callback. Get Jake's fingerprints done, then take him straight through. I want the bloods moving before control chase again.'

Amy kept her finger on the receiver for another beat after the sergeant finished speaking, listening to a queue that had already stopped being useful. Jake was still pale. The girl at the counter was crying harder now, and the drunk in the corridor had found the cell door with his boot again. Amy wrote CALLBACK ATTEMPTED in her notebook and underlined it once. The line looked official, but the photograph still bothered her.

Amy looked again at the photograph on the screen. Small image, bad light, a man with short dark hair and a scar on his cheek. At the far end of the corridor, the cage door buzzed and a voice said, 'Doctor Roberts for custody.' She did not know the man. Nobody did.

The gaoler had already logged the visitor through the outer cage, and the custody screen had turned the entry green. By the time Roberts reached the desk, he was not

a stranger asking to come in. He was an appointment the system said had arrived.

Jake entered a small white room. In the room stood a machine like a large photocopier with a computer screen. A fridge sat on the floor next to a drawer unit, and two chairs nestled against the wall. The smell changed from stale lager to one that reminded Amy of changing the nappy on her older sister's baby: the aroma wasn't unpleasant. Amy used the baby wipes to clean Jake's dirty fingers before taking fingerprints. She swabbed Jake's mouth for DNA too.

'FME's here Amy,' said the sergeant.

Standing in front of the sergeant's desk was the Forensic Medical Examiner (FME), the police doctor.

Beside the sergeant's keyboard, a marker pen hung from a piece of string and a box of blue gloves sat open with one glove caught in the lid. The clutter made the stranger look more official, not less.

The doctor was about forty: male, Caucasian, five feet ten, wiry, with short dark-brown hair and a thin scar on his left cheek.

'New doctor, Amy; agency cover, first week on the borough. The provider says he covered Westminster last month, and control have already chased twice for the drink-drive bloods. Get Jake sorted with his meds first; then we can draw blood from cell 3.'

'Where's the FME room?' said the new doctor. His accent carried the hard vowels of South Africa.

The sergeant pointed to a cubicle opposite the fingerprint room: the room was a mirror image, but contained a hospital bed, a desk and the breathalyser machine. A basin and hand soap.

The FME picked up a bag from the floor, entered the room, sat in one chair and pulled another next to him. Jake and Amy followed him.

Roberts checked Jake's pulse with two fingers, then held Jake's chin and looked into his pupils. His movements were quick, bored and practised. Amy watched his hands. No tremor. No hesitation. He asked Jake what medication he took. Jake gave a brand name, then changed it to a colour, then shrugged. Roberts wrote anyway, the pen moving in short ugly strokes.

Jake's eyes moved to Amy. 'He isn't-' Roberts lifted the paper cup before the sentence could finish and angled it towards Jake's mouth with a tired medical patience that made the interruption look like care. 'Water first,' he said. 'Then words.' Amy wrote the medication colour on the side of her notebook so she would not lose it later.

Jake watched the door behind Roberts more than the tablets. Twice he seemed ready to speak, and twice Roberts moved first: pulse, pupils, water, blister strip, dosage box. Each action looked medical enough to close the space where a warning might have fitted.

The custody phone rang again outside. The sergeant called for someone to answer it. A drunk in the corridor began singing the first line of a football song and forgot the rest. Roberts pressed a blister strip flat against the desk so Amy saw the pharmacy label, the dosage box, the printed warning and the cramped initials in the corner of the medical sheet.

‘Have a seat, mate,’ said the doctor. He smiled at Jake. ‘I’m Roberts.’ He filled a paper cup with water, placed it on the desk and pressed two white tablets from a blister strip marked with a generic pharmacy label. ‘These are only to steady you until the proper prescription comes through. Small dose. You’re dehydrated and running hot, so do not take anything else without me seeing it.’

‘Thanks. Jake, we might as well crack on with the interview, as you don’t want your solicitor; you can sleep after that.’ Jake and Amy left the doctor in his office and walked into the interview room.

‘I’ve got something I need to tell you,’ said Jake.

‘Hold on for just two minutes while I get set up, take a seat over there please.’ Jake slumped in the chair furthest away from the door.

The bang startled Amy as Jake collapsed on the table. He had been pale since fingerprints, but this was different: his breath hitched twice, then stopped. Her training vanished and she saw only a boy’s face pressed sideways against the wood, eyes open and already beyond her reach.

'Jake!' Amy shook his shoulder, but he didn't move, his cheeks pressed the desk; his eyes stared. Amy ran from the interview room and into the empty FME room.

'Where's the doctor Sarge?'

'He's just popped out for a cigarette.'

Amy turned back towards the interview room. The corridor seemed too bright and too slow. Somewhere behind her a custody phone rang and rang. Nobody answered it.

Her fingers still smelled of baby wipes from Jake's fingerprinting: soft, domestic, worse.

She tried to remember each step in order. The gate. The screen. The provider reference. The green tick. The cramped initials on the medical sheet. The sergeant clicking accept while the phone rang. Each piece stayed where it belonged.

Later, Amy would understand the worst part: none of the steps had looked reckless while they were happening. The gate had checked an ID. The rota had supplied a name. She had attempted the callback. Jake was still dead.

FIVE

At the outer gate, the gaoler had asked Roberts to hold his laminated card up to the glass. Roberts had done it without leaning too close. The card carried the right provider logo, the right blue strip, the right little hologram that caught the strip light briefly. The gaoler had compared it with the emailed image on the desk, nodded and buzzed him through.

Now, leaving, Roberts did not hurry. He signed the movement book with the same cramped scrawl he had used on the medical sheet and wrote FME KIT in the property column. People were less curious when an object had a boring name.

At the bottom of the movement page, the tail of the R in Roberts sat flatter than it had on the medical sheet. The gaoler saw ink, time, provider name and kit bag, not handwriting.

The gaoler glanced at the bag. 'Back for the drink-drive bloods?' Roberts capped the pen before answering. 'Controlled stock is in the car. I need to log the batch number with the provider first, or your sergeant will reject the form.' Boring enough to pass.

The rule was printed on the wall behind the hatch: controlled drugs were not to be left unattended in

custody. The gaoler had quoted it himself often enough to stop hearing it as a rule. Roberts merely handed the room its own procedure back.

The gaoler checked the movement book again and frowned at the provider name. 'You lot changed names this year, didn't you?' Roberts smiled, as if the question bored him in the exact way it bored every contractor who had answered it too often. 'Same rota company, new trading name. Procurement like renaming things more than paying invoices.' The gaoler snorted, found nothing in the joke worth challenging and pressed the gate release.

The outer gate stuck halfway open and stopped with a dry metallic cough. For three seconds Roberts stood exposed between the two cages while the gaoler hit the release again and muttered about a maintenance ticket nobody would read. Roberts kept the bag at his side, not too tight, not too loose, and let his face settle into contractor patience. When the lock finally clacked, he walked through at the same speed he had chosen before the fault.

Roberts crossed the police station yard with the medical bag in his hand and the signed custody medical sheet folded in his pocket. His thumb ached from holding the pen too tightly during the signature, so he loosened his grip before anyone could read tension as haste. The gaoler had unlocked the cage door so he could smoke, and nobody thought to ask why the new doctor needed to take his kit outside; agency doctors often kept

controlled stock with them, and the custody suite was busy enough for assumptions to harden into fact.

He passed a man washing police cars, opened the gate and stepped out into the high street.

The shops and coffee places had closed, emptying customers into the bars, pubs and restaurants that lined the side streets. The sun was low; it would be light until around ten p.m., when the sky would turn a deep blue.

'I know that you're just dying to talk,' said a teenager, wearing a red shirt with the logo of a charity.

'I'm already a member,' said Roberts and continued walking.

'Thanks, much appreciated.'

In an alley beside a restaurant, Roberts lifted the lid of a black bin and dropped the medical bag inside.

Roberts crossed the road, entered the tube station and jogged down the escalators.

The message read: 'Friday window live. Courier failed. Custody exposure contained. Response preserved. Murray compromised. Remove at RV. Standard terms and conditions.' Roberts read it twice, deleted it, then waited at the bottom of the escalator while a family blocked the exit with two suitcases and a collapsed buggy. The delay lasted nine seconds. He counted all of them.

Nine seconds meant nothing. A child dropped a stuffed rabbit against his shoe and Roberts stepped around it with a patience that cost him another two seconds.

Murray had changed the meeting point twice after the street recovery failed, then chosen the station for cameras, staff and crowds. The message did not say he was frightened.

The evening had not gone cleanly. Roberts trusted fall-backs, dull labels and frightened men who could still be moved to a second address.

Roberts had walked the mezzanine the previous evening, noted the blind wedge near the glass barrier and left the tube in a station locker before taking the night train south. Murray had chosen King's Cross for cameras, staff and crowds. Roberts had accepted it for the same reasons.

Murray thought public space made him safer. Roberts folded the thought away. A public place gave witnesses too many angles and too many versions. That was different from safety.

He emerged from the underground into a plaza. He paused at the old Victorian facade, restored with a modern canopy and recessed lights in the steelwork.

'Evening Standard?' said the man by the paper stall.

'Thanks.' Roberts took the newspaper and strode into the station near Platform 8 where a train would leave for Edinburgh at nine p.m. Roberts checked the time:

8.30 p.m.

He bought a first-class single ticket and opened locker 157 with the key he'd collected on his arrival the night before. He picked out a baseball cap; it was a little late to need sun protection, but he wouldn't stand out. He also drew out a black metallic cylinder and wrapped it in the Evening Standard before walking through the open ticket barriers into the Western Concourse.

The concourse roof rose from a central trunk and spread into a white steel web above the station. Roberts admired the engineering, then began mapping cameras, staff positions and the dead little wedges where architecture, advertisements and tired attention made gaps.

A set of escalators carried passengers to a mezzanine, crammed with the usual chain cafes. The station was still busy, but the number of stationary figures staring at the massive departure board had dwindled from its peak a few hours ago.

He climbed to the mezzanine and bought a coffee in a takeaway cup from a Spanish teenager. From her metal lapel badges, he gathered that she also spoke French and Italian. He chose a plastic chair set back from the glass barrier, giving himself a view of the concourse below.

A cleaner put a yellow sign beside his chosen table and asked him to move while she wiped under the chairs. Roberts smiled, lifted the coffee and chose a second seat

two metres along. The angle was worse. A steel upright clipped part of the advertising stand below. He waited until a family with three rucksacks drifted away, then moved again, slowly enough to look indecisive rather than careful.

The move cost him twelve seconds and worsened the line through the glass. Roberts let the irritation pass through his jaw, not his hands.

The Spanish teenager called after him that he'd left his receipt. Roberts thanked her, went back for it and dropped it into the bin by the counter. Small friction. Small witnesses. Neither mattered unless he pretended not to notice them.

The model treated seconds like noise. Roberts did not. Receipts, cleaners, dropped toys, staff politeness: people kept spending tiny pieces of his window for reasons the model could label but not prevent.

A British Transport Police officer came up the escalator and slowed beside the cleaner's yellow sign, eyes moving across the mezzanine with the bored caution of someone looking for a reason to finish a shift badly. Roberts lifted his coffee, checked the departures board like a man choosing platform numbers, and waited for the officer's gaze to pass over him. It did, but not quickly enough.

A member of station staff stopped at the glass to retie a barrier strap and blocked the clean line for twelve seconds. Roberts kept the coffee cup near his mouth,

watched the reflection instead of Murray and let the irritation pass through his jaw rather than his hands. When the staff member moved, the angle had changed by half a chair. Roberts moved the newspaper, not himself.

At 8.55 p.m., a man in orange shorts entered the hall and stopped near a deserted advertising stand.

5 minutes early, army timings.

Murray had a mashed-up face, and Roberts wondered whether this could have led to the man's impending demise.

Roberts waited three more minutes. Then he eased the metal tube from the newspaper, unfolded the short brace against his forearm and aimed through the gap between the glass barrier and the handrail. The cylinder hissed once. Murray touched his neck, looked surprised rather than afraid, and dropped.

The overhead clock showed 20.59. Roberts rolled the cylinder back into the newspaper and jogged down the escalator towards the Eastern concourse. The Spanish café worker glanced up because he still had not taken his receipt; the cleaner glanced up because he had moved twice. Neither look held him. He reached the rearmost doors as the guard blew the whistle, stepped inside, and let the train carry him away.

SIX

Jamie found Rob in the lighting booth. A dead man lay sprawled in a seat next to him. 'No trace of the suspect Rob, they've set up a cordon outside, and we've got dog units arriving. Mike Baker from CID is here.'

A man wearing a baggy suit entered the room and said, 'Evening Shrek.'

'Hello Mike,' Rob replied.

'Would you do me the courtesy of getting your size 12 boots out of my crime scene please?'

'Would you do me the courtesy of returning my tenner?'

'They can't get hold of the FME. They're trying to bring one in from another borough; I'll be hanging around here a while. The man who found the body is outside on the landing, can you take his statement and pick up any CCTV?'

Jamie and Rob left Mike Baker and found a timid man waiting for them.

'Are you all right to give us a statement?'

'Yeah, no problem.'

'Also, do you know where we can get a copy of the CCTV footage?'

'Bob would have sorted it normally, but I can probably download it for you.'

'Bob's the dead man?'

'Yes, Bob Simpkin, he did the lights and all the IT around here, but if we go down to the security room, then I'll see what I can do.'

They walked down to the bottom of the stairs and into an office. Inside the room were two desks and computer equipment. The man fiddled around with the computers and after a few minutes handed Rob a USB stick.

'You can boot that one in, I've already got one from earlier.' Rob gave the stick to Jamie. He turned to the man. 'How long did you know Bob?'

'A long time. Bob worked here for over 20 years and was part of the furniture; everyone liked him. I was his assistant.' The assistant had a red face and puffy eyes.

'There was someone who didn't like him, can you think of anything unusual?'

'Bob was a very busy man, full of energy; he didn't get much sleep. His phone was always ringing, and he always promised people things by different dates.'

'What things?'

'The lighting was a hobby rather than a job; Bob made his income elsewhere. Secure courier systems mostly: trackers, immobilisers, tamper alarms. Recovery call-outs too, for when a locked vehicle became the

cargo. He also had modelling software he never talked about properly. Response maps, he called them once, then changed the subject. A couple of invoices had a three-letter prefix he laughed off when I asked him about it: PKL. He made it sound like a billing shell rather than a proper company, the sort of name used when the real client did not want to be written down. He liked anything that made a vehicle behave like a locked room.'

Jamie took his second statement of the night while Rob bought three coffees from the lady in the foyer; she refused payment. He handed one to the assistant. 'Do you know where Bob parked his car?'

'The garage on Parker Street. Bob was the only man here who ever drove to work, said he liked to get things done on the way, he's made a few illegal modifications to the car.'

'We know that place; let's poke around Jamie.'

The man opened a desk drawer and took out something that looked like a little toy car on a key ring. 'Here's the key.' He handed it to Rob.

'Thanks for your help. Sorry for your loss.' A single tear escaped from the man's eye and slalomed down his cheek. Rob and Jamie left him and walked through the yellow police tape, which cordoned off the theatre.

The pair walked along Russell Street and turned left into Drury Lane. They headed right into Parker Street. The road was narrow and lined with red brick buildings

either side: cypress trees grew through a steel frame that retained the facade of a building.

Towards the end of the road, they arrived at an underground car park on the left. A ramp dropped into the car park, and a pedestrian entrance from the pavement. The two officers descended the ramp.

'What colour do you think he'd go for?' said Rob.

'Blue.' Jamie pointed to a large saloon parked in a middle bay.

They approached the Tesla and circled it.

Up close, the saloon did not look exotic. It looked like a fleet car that had been made dull on purpose: black security film on the rear glass, a courier-company permit in the windscreen and two small calibration stickers tucked low beside the tax disc holder. The kind of car nobody remembered because it had been built to become paperwork.

A gentle clicking sound came from the car, and the internal lights glowed as the key in Rob's pocket triggered the proximity sensor. Jamie walked around the back of the vehicle and opened the boot; Bob was a tidy man, nothing in it. Jamie opened the rear door and searched the back seats. Rob climbed into the passenger seat and explored the side pockets, glove box and under-seat tray. He then sat in the driver's seat.

A faded fleet-services sticker sat in the corner of the windscreen, half-scraped away. In the driver's door

pocket Jamie found two old recovery receipts, a courier immobiliser checklist and a fuel-card envelope with Bob's handwriting across it: ADAM unit temperamental - response map volatile - do not power-cycle until destination copied. Under that, in smaller capitals, he had added: PKL handover incomplete - Reflux archive not copied - Laws wants clean transfer. Jamie did not yet know what Reflux was, but he understood the shape of the note: a route box, a hidden client and a file somebody wanted moved before anyone could ask why.

On the back of one receipt Bob had sketched three routes over the same small map. One line was marked ACTUAL, one EXPECTED and one INTERVENTION. The third line avoided two camera pinch points and a service gate before it reached the same destination. Jamie did not like the fact that Bob had drawn the intervention before anyone in the car had moved.

A smaller note sat under the sketch in Bob's tight capitals: DRIVER RESPONSE OUTSIDE PREDICTED AVOIDANCE. INTERVENTION STILL VALID. Jamie read it twice. Route planning cared where a vehicle went. It did not usually care why the driver hesitated. ADAM seemed to care about the hesitation.

At the bottom edge of the paper, almost lost in an oil stain, Bob had written two more names: MATTHEWS - medical bridge / LAWS - transfer authority. Jamie did not know either name. He photographed them anyway.

'Jamie, check the front storage, will you?'

Jamie strolled over to the front of the car. A black plastic box lay in the storage compartment. A yellow sticker on the object had one word printed on it: Adam. A smaller white service label underneath read RESPONSE MAP / LIVE ROUTE / DO NOT PURGE. Jamie took the box and sat in the passenger seat. 'There was just this in there.' He handed it to Rob.

It was around five inches long by one inch wide; a seam circled it, but there was no visible hinge and no keyhole. Rob pulled and twisted the box, but it didn't open. The outer material felt like a hard soap rather than wood or metal or plastic. It was much heavier than he expected; like a lump of lead. He turned it in his hands, and nothing rattled.

A customs-style tamper label ran over the seam. It had been cut once and resealed with a second strip, both dates inside the same week. Bob had wanted someone to know the unit had moved, but not enough to stop the move happening.

'We might as well drive this back to the station,' said Rob, grinning, but he did not touch the start button.

Jamie lifted his radio. Static answered from the concrete. He tried his mobile next; one bar appeared, vanished, then came back as a useless hollow triangle. Rob stood by the open driver's door, half in and half out, and looked up the ramp towards the street.

'We tell Mike,' Jamie said.

'We will.' Rob looked at the touchscreen. 'After we know whether this thing is about to take itself somewhere.'

The sensible answer sat between them: step back, tape off the garage, wait for CID. Rob looked towards the ramp again. No signal, no footsteps, no Mike Baker.

Jamie climbed halfway up the ramp until his phone found one bar and called the theatre number printed on the incident log. The call connected, broke into fragments and died while Mike Baker was still saying his name. Jamie tried again and got voicemail. He left the job code, the registration and the word ADAM, then walked back down because Rob was still beside the open car and the screen was still asking for a decision.

Rob opened his mouth, then shut it. The textbook answer was upstairs with Mike Baker and a roll of tape. The live answer was glowing on a screen that claimed it could delete the only destination they had.

Jamie knew which sentence would appear in a later report: officers should have withdrawn and preserved the scene. The countdown kept pulsing.

Rob waited by the open door while Jamie counted twenty seconds out loud. No call came back. No radio tone broke through the concrete. The screen kept offering them three choices. Waiting was not one of them.

They did the dull checks first. Jamie photographed the box, the dashboard and the number plate. Rob put the key on the concrete outside the driver's door and waited

to see whether the car changed state. Nothing moved. No alarm sounded. The screen continued to pulse, patient and bland.

Jamie tried the interior handle with the door open and found a second release cable tucked behind a screwed inspection plate. Courier conversion, he thought. Not clever. Just illegal enough to be useful.

'Mike won't like that.'

Jamie pointed to the central touchscreen. Flashing in the middle of it was a message: 'Courier route interrupted. Destination 52 miles. Confirm route, cancel, lockdown.' Beneath it sat a job code, a recovery reference and the word ADAM in the same square type as the yellow sticker on the box. A smaller line pulsed underneath: 'ROUTE DATA HELD IN VOLATILE MEMORY. LOCKDOWN WILL PURGE ACTIVE DESTINATION. ROUTE EXPIRY 00:01:27.' No skull icon. No warning. Just three soft buttons waiting for a human mistake. Whatever ADAM was, it had reduced a police decision to a courier prompt.

A smaller diagnostic box flashed and vanished beneath the route line: SUBJECT RESPONSE CONFIDENCE - UNSTABLE. Jamie stared at the word subject.

Another line flickered up and vanished before Jamie could photograph it: PKL-LIVE / RESPONSE MODEL HOLDING.

The screen looked like fleet software: ugly, cheap, overconfident and trusted by people who had never had

to bet their life on it. The job code matched the label on the box. The recovery reference matched the format in Bob's paperwork.

Jamie copied the job code onto the back of his notebook. His pen shook once, then steadied. The screen waited with the patience of a machine that had no duty to be reasonable.

He photographed the recovery reference, the odometer, the box label and the three options on the screen, then sent the pictures to Baker. The first two messages stuck on pending. The third failed outright. Concrete made the phone almost useless; the screen in front of them remained perfectly willing.

'Where was he going, I wonder?' Rob hovered over the screen. 'Confirm is not neutral,' Jamie said. 'It never is.' The blue line pulsed again and the word purge made waiting feel like losing evidence. Rob had spent twenty years being told not to let evidence walk away. His fingertip touched Confirm route.

For one beat, it worked.

A soft click came from inside each door. The screen changed to a blue line starting in central London and ending somewhere to the west of the M25, but the car did not move.

The locks did not slam like a trap in a film. They made the same polite sound the car had made when Rob first came near it. That was what made the sound worse: nothing in the cabin admitted that the rules had

changed.

'Doors just locked,' said Jamie.

Rob pulled the handle. Nothing. 'Bob had made more than a few illegal modifications. This is a safe on wheels.'

Jamie pulled at the screwed inspection plate. It shifted a millimetre and stopped. The screws had been filled with resin after installation; a maintenance shortcut for a contractor, a prison for anyone inside.

Jamie pressed the cancel button. A pin snapped somewhere low in the centre console. A sharp medicinal smell filled the cabin, too small to be dramatic and therefore worse. His throat prickled. Something cleaner and colder came from a cartridge hidden behind the trim. The side glass had the dull heavy look of laminate. Kicking it would waste the few useful seconds he still had.

'Unauthorised attempt,' said a female voice from the car's speakers.

Through the smoked glass, Jamie caught fragments: a recovery truck reversing down the ramp, an amber light turning slowly, a tablet showing a booked commercial collection, and a digital signature box already filled. One masked man checked the number plate against the work order and nodded. The work order did not say police officers. It said disabled courier unit, third-party recovery authorised, no driver contact required.

The tablet carried a job number, a payment account, a bay reference and the note DRIVER UNAVAILABLE - NO CONTACT REQUIRED. It looked like a problem already solved by someone else.

The garage ticket had been prepaid. The tablet also carried the theatre incident address, a fleet contact number and the instruction POLICE CORDON NEARBY - AVOID DISTURBANCE. To a recovery driver, that did not read like a warning. It read like permission not to ask questions.

The driver hesitated at the bay number and checked the tablet again. The registration had one digit transposed on the first line and corrected in red on the second. 'Control changed it twice,' the masked man said, impatient rather than careful. 'Disabled courier unit. Driver unavailable. Third-party recovery authorised.' He said the phrases like a man reading dull instructions he had stopped hearing years ago.

The door motors clicked again.

Jamie tried to lift the pistol again, but his arm forgot the order before it reached his hand. The Tesla rose by inches as the recovery gear took the weight. Through the glass he saw the work order on the tablet, the number plate checked, the driver nodding. The garage ceiling slid sideways above him and the dark came down.

The last clear thought he managed was not fear but irritation. He had seen the paperwork clearly. He could

not lift his hand to point at it.

SEVEN

Steve opened the cabin bag and rifled through the contents.

'There's nothing out of the ordinary Andy.'

'I like your rubber duck.'

'Rubber duck?'

'When you were flicking through your boxer shorts there, I thought I saw a little rubber duck?'

Steve searched through his underwear again and in amongst them he found a small yellow toy duck. Steve picked it up and tried to squeeze. 'It doesn't quack.' He frowned. 'Feels heavier than it should too.'

'Can I see.' Steve passed the duck to Andy. 'Looks like something's blocking the hole.'

'Maybe my son put it in the bag. He's often planting surprises in my luggage.'

'Or perhaps you're a drug mule. That rubber duck could be full of Colombia's finest marching powder.'

'Seems a shame to open him up. I like my new travel companion, let me check-in with Tommy and see if he planted it.' Steve got out his phone and dialled. 'Hi, Nikki, how are you?'

'I'm having lunch with Tommy,' said Steve's wife from three thousand miles away.

'How's he feeling?'

'Tommy's much better, a good rest this weekend, and he thinks he'll be OK for school on Monday; I'll put him on speaker.'

'Hello Tommy, how are you?'

'Hello Daddy, are you having a good trip?'

'Tiring buddy, glad you're better. I'll call you and Mummy later for a chat. I've got a question for you. Did you pack me a surprise in my travel bag?'

'Don't think so?'

'I've found a little plastic duck.'

'No wasn't me, make sure you bring him back though.'

'Sometimes the airline gives you a plastic duck in your travel pack,' said Nikki.

'I don't travel on the same airlines as you, Honey. I'd settle for a standard size seat. Glad you're both all OK. Got to go; I'm with Andy; I'll call you before I go to bed, probably when you're having dinner.'

'Bye Daddy.'

'Speak later, say "Hi" to Andy,' Nikki said.

Steve kept the phone in his hand after the call ended, thumb resting on the black screen. For once, the joke did not arrive on time. 'He sounded better,' he said, and

the relief in it made the duck feel worse rather than better.

Andy looked away while Steve stared at Nikki's name. There were calls fathers made easily and calls they put off until the silence became part of the house. He had told himself Max preferred space. It sounded less cowardly than saying he had stopped knowing how to reach him.

'You used to enjoy trouble,' Andy said. Steve looked at the dead screen and gave a brief laugh that did not reach his eyes. 'That was before trouble had my home number.' Andy saw the years between them properly: the old grin still there, but stretched thinner now across a husband and father with people waiting for him three thousand miles away.

Steve turned the phone over in his hand. A blue dinosaur sticker clung to the case, one corner grey with pocket lint. Tommy had put it there at Christmas and declared it lucky. Steve had complained about it for five minutes, then carried it across the Atlantic anyway.

Andy rolled the duck between his palms again. Something shifted inside with a dense, sluggish movement. He set it beside the manual tag and the airline email. For half a minute the table looked almost comic: passport, police statement, rubber duck, pint glass. Steve tried to laugh and failed.

Andy tried the number Jamie had left on the torn statement page. It rang to a desk, then another desk,

then a civilian voice who asked for the incident number twice and could not find it until Andy read the first line from Jamie's notebook.

He gave her the manual tag, the photograph and the rubber duck. She asked whether anyone was hurt now. Andy looked at Steve across the table, bruised but sitting upright, and said, 'Not now.' The answer shrank the evening.

'I'll add it to the robbery log and ask an officer to call you back,' she said. The line clicked to hold music before he could explain why the word robbery was already too small. Andy ended the call and looked at the duck again.

The desk called back four minutes later from a withheld number. A response officer had been assigned when available; the vanishing bike, the photo and the airline reference were all noted against the log. Andy asked whether noted meant someone was coming. The officer paused, corrected himself and said someone would review it. Steve lifted both palms in a weak little gesture. Andy looked at the blue dinosaur sticker on Steve's phone and said nothing.

Andy asked for the incident number and read it back while Steve checked the empty end of the street. The officer corrected one digit, then told him not to cut the duck open if he could avoid it and not to leave the scene unless he had to.

Across the road, the man in the delivery jacket reappeared by the loading bay and held his phone

against his ear. Behind him, a red Ford Transit sat nose-out with its hazards off, lost among bins, beer kegs and delivery crates. The man's eyes moved once to the duck in Andy's hand, once to Steve's open bag, and then away too quickly.

'No mercy,' Andy said at last. 'Let's see inside the duck. I'll ask for a knife at the bar.'

Across the road, the delivery-jacket man turned his back to the pub window and spoke into the phone with his free hand cupped over his mouth. The Transit did not move, but one brake light glowed for a second and died.

Steve picked up his phone again and stared at Nikki's name. For once he did not hide behind a joke quickly enough. 'I'll call her properly later,' he said. 'No point frightening her over a toy.'

He tried to smile, but the smile had nowhere to go. Andy had seen Steve bluff landlords, bouncers and border guards with the same grin. This time the grin did not arrive.

Andy had taken three steps towards the door when he looked back. Steve sat there, one hand on the cabin bag, the other on the phone, trying to make the evening smaller.

Before Andy reached the bar, he heard a screech of tyres outside and shouting; he couldn't make out the words. The sound was not arrival so much as release: a vehicle moving from waiting to action.

Andy rushed outside and glimpsed a red Ford Transit turning left onto the main street. There was no trace of Steve; the bags and the yellow bike had also disappeared. His mind refused the obvious and offered him rubbish instead: Steve in the toilets, Steve at the bar, Steve stepping out with a grin because this was all some stupid trick. Then the woman's face took those options away.

The panic did not arrive as a shout. It arrived as too many instructions at once: run after the van, call Steve, call the police, check the table, remember the number plate, do not lose the duck. Andy pressed both hands flat against his thighs until one order became larger than the rest. Start with what can still be held.

Chasing the van would have felt like courage. Staying beside the table felt like failure dressed up as procedure. Andy forced himself to look at what remained because Steve had vanished into the only thing Andy could not hold: motion.

One woman that Steve had spoken with earlier trembled; tears trickled over her pale cheek. 'About six men jumped out, hit your friend with a gun and bundled him into the van; the men were shouting and pointing weapons. The van had been there before, I think. By the loading bay. I thought it was delivering to the pub.'

'Did you get the registration mark of the van?'

'Yes, I took a photo as they drove off down the road.'

Andy stayed where he had been told to stay. He photographed the duck, the torn tag, the handwritten number and the half-finished statement Jamie had left behind, then sent the images to himself before the night could lose another small thing.

He labelled the last image RUBBER DUCK, deleted it, and typed TOMMY'S DUCK instead.

Keep items separate. Handle them as little as possible. Photograph before moving. He did not know whether he was doing it properly, so he wrote Steve's name at the top of the receipt and started again.

The operator treated Steve's abduction as the live incident and the earlier details as notes against it. Andy kept the duck in sight while she typed.

A response officer called from an unknown number, asked him to repeat the registration, then asked whether Steve had enemies. Andy gave the truth and heard how thin it sounded. Steve was here for a drink. He had a wife. He had a son. Tommy still wanted the duck back.

The duck was no longer only a clue. It was the last promise Steve had made to his son, and Andy had already let the evening take too much from them.

He checked the times again against the receipts on the table and the photo data on his phone. The first photograph of Steve's passport sat at 19.34. The airline call had lasted six minutes and twelve seconds. The van image was stamped 20.08. He wrote each time twice,

once on the receipt and once in a note app, then compared the two lists for mistakes. There were none.

The officer asked him to send the van image, the tag photograph and the duck photograph to a generic evidence inbox, spelling the address slowly because the line kept clipping the ends off words. Andy sent them while the officer stayed on the phone. A minute later the officer confirmed receipt of only two attachments. The van image had arrived. The tag image had arrived. The duck had failed to send. Andy sent it again and watched the progress bar crawl across the screen while Steve's empty chair sat opposite him.

The police had pieces. Steve's empty chair stayed opposite him, close enough to touch with his foot.

Andy called Steve again. Voicemail. He called Nikki and cut the call before the first full ring, then stared at the phone as if it had accused him of cowardice. Across the road, a red Transit went past with a ladder on the roof. He stepped into the kerb before he saw the number plate was wrong.

He remembered Steve making a joke at the rope, as if charm could still lower the stakes. The memory lasted half a second and left him with the empty chair again.

He could tell Nikki now and make the horror real in another country, or he could wait until he had one fact that did not sound impossible. He hated the calculation.

He imagined Tommy answering instead of Nikki, asking whether Daddy had remembered the duck. The thought

was complete and useless. Andy put the phone face down before it could ring at anyone else.

'Yes.'

'I'll update the log and call you back if control needs anything else.' The line went dead.

Andy stood with the phone against his ear long after the call had ended. The bag, the photograph, the tag and the duck lay in front of him, all fitting on a pub table. He wrote the van registration again.

He put the duck on a clean napkin and folded the edges loosely over it. He still wanted to cut it open. The operator's warning sat in his head: keep it separate, do not handle it more than necessary. Stupid rules were still rules: the only thing left that did not depend on bravery.

Another ten minutes passed before anyone called back. This time it was the airline, not the police. A different woman said the manual tag reference was now locked pending a security review and she could not discuss the release entry further. Steve was the named passenger, so Steve needed to call. Andy looked at the empty chair opposite him and said Steve was unavailable. The woman apologised in the careful voice of someone reading from a screen.

After twenty minutes, the waiting became its own kind of panic. Hunger arrived at the wrong moment: not appetite, just the body demanding fuel. The shame of it irritated him. Steve had been dragged into a van and

Andy's stomach still expected to be fed. He saw a budget takeaway pizza place on the other side of the road. From its front window he could still see the pub, the alley and most of the pavement.

He told himself he was not moving evidence; he was keeping it with the witness who had already handled it, within sight of the scene, away from a pub table where strangers kept leaning over to look.

He crossed the road slowly, looking back twice, and sat on a plastic bench near the door with his phone on the table and the duck beside it.

A delivery rider argued at the counter about a missing garlic bread. A child on the next table dragged a red balloon under a chair leg. The room stayed normal around the thing on Andy's napkin.

A waitress sauntered towards him. 'Can I get you anything to drink?' She spoke with an Italian accent.

'A Coke please, I'll have a Margherita with a thin crust.' Andy didn't bother to check the menu.

'We only do standard crust is that OK?'

'Yes, no problem.'

She sashayed back to the counter and passed a ticket over to an enormous man who wore a white apron over his triangular belly.

'Here's your Coke.' The waitress placed a pint glass in front of Andy. 'I like your duck.' Andy had placed the

duck on the table as he reached to take a swig.

‘Thanks.’ Andy watched as his pizza base advanced to station two. A girl, around eighteen years old, with a bird tattoo on her lower neck, received the pizza base from the dough spinner and spread a thin layer of tomato sauce over it.

‘I’ve brought you a bowl for your duck.’ The waitress placed a clear bowl, half full of water on the table. She picked up the duck and popped it in the bowl where it floated on top of the water. ‘We like to keep all our customers happy.’

The men behind the counter making the pizza were laughing. Andy raised a smile.

He studied the duck bobbing in the water and returned his attention to his pizza’s progress.

The toppings station came next. Two more girls, in their late teens, worked at this station, in front of bowls of ham, olives, pineapples and mushrooms.

He glanced back to his duck. Purple threads leaked from a hairline split near the duck’s tail and curled through the water like ink.

‘Refill on the coke?’

Andy had finished the whole drink. ‘Yes please.’ He gazed at the oven: the bottleneck.

‘Here you go; enjoy.’ The waitress carried Andy’s pizza. She stared at the table, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’

'Why? The service is great; you have a fantastic restaurant here.'

With the bottle off the table, the little duck returned to being a child's thing: yellow plastic, black eyes, comic beak.

It looked harmless.

Andy looked at the receipt note taped to the bottle. Steve's son had asked for the duck back. A child had thought it was a toy. A waitress had given it a bowl of water and apologised for the mistake. The purple threads had done the rest.

EIGHT

Saturday morning. Amy woke and reached for Jamie. The empty space beside her was cold. She blamed an early start, then remembered they had both finished late. He should have been home hours ago. She lay still and listened for the familiar sounds of him downstairs: the kettle, the cupboard door, the muttered argument with a radio presenter. Nothing.

The milk reminder sat at the top of her messages, unanswered. Coward, he had typed and never sent. She knew it was his because the joke was unfinished.

Amy donned the white dressing gown Jamie had bought from a hotel, during a mini break last summer. The robe cheered her: a different uniform, no work.

She descended the stairs and lifted the post from the mat near the front door. In the kitchen, Amy chose an Americano pod and made coffee; she'd choose decaf later. Jamie always left the spoon in the sink, never beside it, as if gravity had made the decision for him. The sink was empty.

Jamie hadn't come home. Overtime was possible, but unlikely after the last late shift and stranger without a message. Amy tried to think like a police officer and failed like a girlfriend; every sensible explanation

collapsed under the weight of the silence.

Amy pulled her phone from her bag and called Jamie; voicemail; no messages on her mobile.

After making toast she sat at the table and gazed through the window; the kitchen was her favourite room; it had bifold doors that overlooked a terraced garden with steps leading to a fence with a gate. Both the garden and the maisonette were tiny, but the view from the kitchen window was sublime; trees shimmered in a gentle breeze, and birdsong punctuated the silence. The bluetit that had arrived a few months earlier popped in and out of the bird box, and a squirrel darted along the fence. Amy ate the toast and drank the coffee; she opened the location app on her phone; Jamie's location showed near Covent Garden.

Amy showered, pulled on blue jeans and a white T-shirt, and tied her brown hair into a ponytail. The face in the mirror looked awake enough to fool a stranger, but not her.

She told Becks she was only looking. The lie sounded professional enough to pass.

'Hi Becks, are you OK?'

'Hi Amy, sorry I didn't call you, but I couldn't think what to say. Jamie and Rob didn't book off last night. Control still had them shown as scene duty at the theatre, CID thought they'd gone back to uniform, and nobody realised the car park was the last proper contact until the handover this morning.'

'Where were they?'

'At the theatre job. Their radios dropped out after they went towards the garage, but that happens underground all the time. The inspector's checking it now. I'm sorry Amy, I would have come over after my shift.'

Amy heard the gap clearly because she lived inside gaps like that. Control had a status. CID had an assumption. Uniform had a handover. Each part made sense alone, and together they had produced a missing night.

'Don't worry Becks, I'll see you soon.'

Going back into London was a drag, but waiting at home was worse. Amy told Becks where she was going and promised, as a police officer rather than a girlfriend, that she would call the moment she found anything. Then she grabbed her bag and headed for the Piccadilly line. She usually read on the train; today the book stayed closed in her lap.

At Covent Garden, Jamie's phone location put him north of the theatre. The app had last updated at 8.10 p.m. the previous evening. Amy stood on the pavement and let commuters split around her. She opened the map, closed it, opened it again and compared the blue dot with the car park sign opposite. The phone had not wandered. It had stopped.

She called Becks and kept her voice low. 'Check whether anyone booked a recovery truck near Parker Street last night. Anything commercial. Anything

pretending to be routine.'

'Amy, are you there on your own?'

'I am looking, not doing.'

She ended the call before Becks could tell her the difference was meaningless.

She put her warrant card back in her bag and stood still for ten seconds. Ten seconds was not patience. It was a rule she gave herself because fear wanted her to run straight past the thing that mattered.

Down the ramp, Amy observed a few cars parked, oil marks on the concrete and a pale scrape where something heavy had recently crossed the bay nearest the exit. A black cable tie lay flattened beside the wall. She photographed both before touching nothing.

Amy dialled the number.

'Hello how may I help you?' the car park attendant said.

'Hello, I'm a police officer. I need to meet with you as soon as possible; I'm on the parking level.'

'I'll come and find you.'

Amy returned to the car park and spotted a lady with grey hair emerging from another door under the main ramp. The attendant walked with a limp.

'Are you the police?' the attendant said.

Amy got her warrant card out of her bag and presented it.

‘Come into my office Cherub, and we’ll have a chat.’

Amy followed the woman into a small room, constructed from the void under the entry ramp. A kettle and mugs on a table, next to two chairs; no screens or computers. A first aid at work certificate hung on the wall above a photo of two middle-aged men.

‘What would you like to drink Poppet?’

‘Nothing, thank you, I’ve just got a few questions.’

‘I don’t get to talk to folks much; are you sure you can’t spare time for a cuppa? It helps to sit before you start chasing shadows.’

‘Thanks, I’ll have a coffee then please, black no sugar.’

The attendant filled the kettle with water. Amy found it hard to estimate the woman’s age. The lady had young eyes, but her wrinkled skin could have been over 70 years old.

‘Now how can I help?’

‘Do you have CCTV?’

‘No CCTV in the garage. Cameras cost money and the owners are cheap. Now what brings you to my doorstep on a sunny Saturday morning, when you should be out enjoying yourself?’

‘I’m looking for two police officers that didn’t book off duty last night.’

‘Are you working today?’

'It's my rest day today.'

'So what brings you here, surely plenty of other police are available?'

'The missing officer is my boyfriend.'

'Oh Sweetie, you must be worried sick, here you go.'
The attendant handed Amy a cup of coffee which was strong and tasted bitter. 'Tell me about your boyfriend.'

'He's about 5 feet 9 tall, and skinny.'

'Tell me about him. Not his height, not his hair. What is he like?'

'Why's that relevant?'

'Honey, worried people miss what's right in front of them. Tiny things matter. Big worries disappear. Best to assume nothing and keep looking.' Her voice was gravel softened by age.

Amy breathed deeply and smiled. 'He's intelligent, top of the class, he knows the answer to every problem and works hard.'

'Sounds like a fine man to be out there keeping me safe.'

'He looks weak and scrawny, but he's tough. He grew up in China and did Kung Fu since he was small, his dad was a diplomat.'

'Do people like him?'

'He's got a few friends.'

'You don't need everyone to like you.'

'There are many people he doesn't get on with, how did you know?'

'I've met lots of people cupcake, not as many as I'd like anymore. I like the sound of your young man. What's his worst bit?'

'He always thinks he's right and doesn't listen to anyone. People say he's not a team player.' Amy almost smiled. 'The worst part is he usually is right, which makes him impossible.'

'Such confidence Angel, maybe he's right all the time but can't persuade people with facts and logic.'

'He makes me so cross sometimes because he is so often right. But he forgets people are not puzzles to be solved.'

'He's got you to help him with the people bit Gorgeous. I bet you've never struggled with people. Have you? The only problem is sometimes you're too kind?'

'You're right; do you know anything?'

'I'm not sure I know anything Precious, but worried people often miss what's right in front of them.'

Amy stared at the woman briefly. 'What probably happened to Jamie?'

'Oh Jamie, what a lovely name, goes well with Amy.'

'I didn't tell you my name.'

'That little plastic card you showed me Petal. Your hair looks more fetching in a ponytail, if I may say so

dearest, rather than up in those buns like on the photo. I had hair like you, a long time ago now mind you.'

'I've enjoyed talking with you, but if you know nothing that might help, I need to be going.'

'But you've not finished your coffee yet. Rushing off won't make the tape run faster or the garage remember more. It might be better to rehydrate; you could have a long day ahead.'

Amy regarded the photo. A little black cat sat on a rug.

'I look after him, and he looks after me.'

'Thanks for all your time, say hello to Jojo for me. Hope you get outside and see the sun today.' Amy walked towards the door.

The attendant stood up and opened the door for Amy. 'Amy, finish your coffee first. Panicking rarely helps anybody think.'

NINE

Jamie woke on a single bed under a thin duvet, springs pressing through the mattress into his back. Sunlight glared against white-painted brick walls. Three empty beds and two wardrobes told him nothing useful.

Jamie wore his trousers and shirt; someone had removed his belt kit, boots and stab vest, along with his radio and mobile phone.

He crept towards the steel door; his hosts had locked it. There was no keyhole, but it had a window. The other window, in the wall, had bars.

Jamie opened the wardrobe door. It had just enough room for a skinny runt like him; Rob would need a different plan if he were nearby. Jamie climbed into the closet. There was no room to sit.

He'd stood still like this for twelve hours on a night shift before, guarding a cordon, a few weeks into his service. He'd wanted to pee but wouldn't take the risk of being found away from his post or being spotted by an unlikely passer-by.

A recent back injury made Jamie doubt he could stand for that long now, but he didn't think it would be a problem; he suspected his hosts would be along to check on him.

Jamie stared at his wrist in the dark; they'd taken the watch he wore to remind him of his parents, who had bought it as a twenty-first birthday present; Jamie had often thought about buying a cheap digital for work.

The missing watch bothered him more than the missing phone. His parents had given it to him for his twenty-first, before retirement carried them thousands of miles away. Jamie wanted rank, achievement, command. He wanted his father to hear his name and feel the old public-service pride reflected back at him.

Jamie refocused on the current situation; the steel door creaked as it opened, and Jamie executed the plan he'd run through in his head.

He shoved both palms against the wardrobe door. It burst open and Jamie drove out behind it, chin up, weight back, body already remembering lessons his mind had no time to name. The movement tore a line of pain through his lower back; if the man came in properly, Jamie knew he was finished.

Rushing in against a competent fighter would provoke a violent reaction. It had been a long time since Jamie had faced a qualified opponent though.

Jamie saw the door was about six inches ajar, with an arm poking through the gap, holding a handgun. The mistake was not Jamie's skill. It was the man outside trusting the weapon more than the doorway.

A gun arm filled the gap. Jamie chopped down hard below the wrist. Bone cracked against the sharp edge of

the door and the weapon spun away.

Jamie caught the broken wrist in his left hand, pulled it towards him, and a bear of a man tumbled into the room; Jamie swung an elbow into the bear's nose.

The giant hit the floor hard and stayed there, stunned rather than beaten. Jamie had maybe ten seconds before size, rage and oxygen returned to him. He picked up the gun, checked the safety catch and searched the bear from top to tail; he found a bunch of keys, clipped them onto his belt hook and left the room.

Above the corridor, neon strip lights hung from the ceiling and provided stark illumination. Several doors lined the walls, but only three of them had windows in the panel.

Jamie checked the first door and peered through the window; there was no one home. He walked over to the second door. There was the shape of a large man under sheets with his hair poking out the top.

Rob?

The first key in the bunch didn't work; ten keys of a similar size. Jamie tried the second key and then the third; the fourth key unlocked the door. Jamie entered the room and jammed it open with the heel of his foot.

The man in the bed sat. He had a bruised eye, and a cut lip.

'I'm not sure what we're doing here, but I suggest you follow me,' Jamie said.

'I don't have a better plan.' Steve got up from the bed.

'Tell me what you know?'

'Not much. I was drinking in a bar last night when a van pulled up; men in masks got out pointing guns. One of them smashed me in the face and bundled me into the back of the van.'

'You don't remember me, do you? I took the call about the street robber that tried to steal your bag. You had a busy evening.'

'Ah, I thought your face seemed familiar.'

'Do you remember anything else?'

'No, they injected me with something in the van, and that's the last I can remember before a crashing sound woke me.'

'Let's get out of here.' They crept along the corridor and arrived at a fire door with a push bar.

'Do you think it's alarmed?'

Jamie pushed the fire door. No alarm sounded. They stepped into a courtyard of red-brick blocks and dead institutional windows, somewhere between a disused barracks and an abandoned school.

The cold concrete bit through Jamie's socks. Steve limped before he had taken ten steps. The courtyard looked open until Jamie counted the doors: two padlocked, one alarmed with a red box above it, one leading back towards the rooms. Freedom was visible,

not available.

'I'd settle for shoes right now.'

The two men stalked through the courtyard and then along a path, next to a brick wall with no windows. Straight ahead of them was a field, and about two hundred metres further on stood the perimeter fence; it was six feet high and painted green; the top of the rails had spikes.

At the end of the wall, the path turned left. Jamie checked the corner. A man stood under a smoking shelter beside a broad reception area, vaping beneath the canopy.

'No chance of getting across the field without being seen,' said Jamie.

Jamie checked for cameras and found three, all fixed high under the guttering. One pointed at the reception door. One covered the field. The third was dead or pretending to be dead; its little red status light had gone out. He did not know which possibility helped him less.

'Shall we try the other direction?'

They walked back down the path. The bear stood in front of them pointing a handgun. Next to him were three other massive men also pointing guns. They were thirty metres away.

'Let's take our chances with the smoking man.' Jamie sprinted down the path, Steve behind him. The man under the shelter looked up and went for his pistol, but

he was too late by half a second. Jamie hit him at full speed, more collision than technique, driving a heel into his chest. The man crashed backwards, and his head bounced off the glass door. Jamie landed badly, ankle folding, and had to use the planter to stay upright.

A ping rang out as a bullet bounced off one of the canopy's circular steel columns. Jamie pushed Steve over a brick planter that contained lavender and dropped after him. His injured foot buckled again and briefly the courtyard went white at the edges. He took the gun out of his pocket with shaking fingers and flicked the smoking man's pistol, that lay on the path towards Steve.

'When they get in the courtyard, aim to the centre of their chests and fire three shots at each of them, you start from the right; I'll start from the left.'

Boots crashed into the courtyard. Jamie and Steve, hidden by the lavender bushes, aimed at the men. The sound was deafening as Jamie and Steve fired. After they'd emptied both pistols, their ears rang and buzzed.

The bear and his companions stood in the courtyard and laughed.

TEN

Roberts got off the train after enjoying the trip; train travel removed decisions from the journey, and real life was full of choices. He'd been travelling North for two hours, first-class, sitting with his back to the driver's cabin so he could see everyone getting off and on at the few stops along the route. Roberts had slept for half an hour between two stops; Sleep when you can.

The sky was dark, and the air still held the day's heat. Roberts stood on the platform as a woman walked towards him. She was around thirty-five, tall, blonde and composed behind square glasses. Roberts pictured her without them and liked both versions, then corrected himself. Attractive people were useful, but only if they underestimated the effect.

'Roberts?'

'Pleased to meet you.'

'Laws is waiting for us at the factory.'

They strolled from the platform and past a ticket office. In the station car park, a blue BMW 3 series sat in the closest bay; the woman clicked her key, and the lights flashed. Roberts got into the passenger seat.

'I'm Julia Matthews.' She pressed the start button and pulled away from the car park onto the road; fields opened on either side, flat to the horizon and empty enough to make witnesses feel theoretical.

'Been working here long? You're not what I expected.'

'I wear glasses, which fits the stereotype?'

'So you're the brains. Do you think it will be worth it?'

'Worth what?'

'Whatever made a hospital psychiatrist leave patients for this.'

Julia kept her eyes on the road. 'Money matters, but it does not explain much. Grief explains more. Vanity explains the rest.'

She had learned that the word recovery opened doors prediction kept shut. At first the distinction had felt like grant-writing. Later, when the model anticipated the moment a frightened man would run, it felt like evidence.

'Your questions are personal,' Roberts said.

'So are your answers, if I can get any.' She accelerated along a straight stretch of single-track road. 'I'm scared to talk to you, if I'm honest. I've read your CV. I've also read what people left out of it.'

'You needn't fear me. I don't kill pretty doctors.'

'You kill useful people when someone pays you to believe they've stopped being useful.'

Roberts smiled. 'You're worried that our employer wants to kill you?'

'Not tonight. Tonight, I'm still needed. I'm documenting the work, copying the files and leaving enough evidence with enough people that my disappearance becomes inconvenient.' She checked the mirror, not for traffic but for his reaction. 'Laws thinks loyalty is a lever. I think leverage works both ways.'

'Boyfriend?'

'Dead.' She said it too quickly, then chose to continue rather than let him make it sentimental. 'Adam was the reason I began. He had a brain injury before he became a file, a file before he became a product, and a product before Laws decided grief could be monetised. He is not the reason I'm still here. That distinction matters.'

Roberts looked at her hands on the steering wheel. They were steady, but too tight at the knuckles. Julia had not stopped believing the first version was merciful; that was what made the later version harder to forgive.

She had built a bridge for damaged people and then watched stronger men put locks on both ends of it. Roberts understood that kind of compromise better than she probably wanted him to. Good intentions were useful cover until they became evidence.

'Does it?'

'It does to me.'

'Do you like face to face?' Roberts said.

'I like choosing who gets to see what. Laws prefers screens because screens make people obedient.'

'You're very direct.'

'You started it.'

The car drove into a parking area and stopped in a bay in front of a warehouse-like building. The walls were around fifteen metres high and made from painted corrugated steel; taller than a barn and of more expensive construction. Roberts gazed left and right; the building faded in the darkness. The pair climbed out of the car and walked over to a roller shutter door. Julia typed a code into a panel. The door rolled upwards.

Roberts let the sentence remain between them. Useful people. Stopped being useful. Julia had not spoken like a woman warning him off; she had spoken like a woman leaving evidence with the nearest dangerous witness.

'Then give me the map,' Roberts said. 'Who is useful to whom?'

Julia looked towards the black glass of the warehouse wall. She seemed to be choosing between confession and silence.

Julia stopped just inside the warehouse, under the white glare of the loading lights. For the first time since the station, she looked less composed than tired.

'If you want the map, start with what matters tonight,' Julia said. 'PKL hides the paper trail. ADAM predicts the response. Reflux opens the chemical route back.'

Genesis is Laws' investor word for pretending a response is a person. Max is not being monitored. He is being argued with.'

She held the words apart as if separation could still make them safe. 'Leave him in the chair too long and help becomes pressure. Pressure becomes instruction.'

Roberts watched her face instead of the machinery. 'That is the rescue version.'

'Yes,' Julia said. The admission cost her more than the explanation. 'The rescue version was the one I could live with.'

Julia tapped the nearest casing with one fingernail. A typed strip under the handle read ADAM RESPONSE SET - PATIENT MODEL ONLY. Someone had crossed out the last three words in black marker, but the pressure of the pen had left them visible when the light caught the label.

Roberts touched the edge of the label without lifting it. The correction told him more than Julia's explanation. Whoever had crossed the words out had not been correcting a file; they had been changing the allowed use of a person.

'And tonight?' Roberts said.

Julia opened a plastic document wallet and laid five tabs along the metal bench. RAND - movement. SIMPKIN - interface. TICHU - chemistry. MATTHEWS - clinical. The fifth tab was pink and carried only two words: LAWS -

authority.

'Tonight is compression,' Julia said. 'Not because the plan is clever. Because every fallback has been pulled into the same twenty-four hours.' She touched the Rand tab. 'The bag tag failed. The custody doctor contained Jake. The recovery truck took the officers. Bob was supposed to move the interface. Steve's bag carried the chemical route. Laws now wants the transfer signed before the broken pieces can be joined.'

Roberts let the tabs settle instead of the names. Objects were harder to lie about than people.

Julia slid the pink tab half an inch towards him. The top sheet carried a single line in blue ink: P. Laws - transfer authority retained. 'I built the medical bridge and then stayed long enough to watch treatment become ownership. Matthews can hold the clinical file, but Laws controls who is allowed to use it.'

A forklift reversed somewhere beyond the racking and its alarm cut across Julia's next sentence. Roberts turned before he meant to. One of the night workers looked over, curious briefly, then went back to his clipboard. Roberts disliked the glance because he had not caused it and could not erase it.

'That is enough map for tonight,' Julia said.

She nodded towards the ranks of black boxes. 'None of this brings Adam back. It is stimulus, response and feedback until the system answers before the patient can. In a hospital, under controls, that might be mercy.'

In this building, it is a market.'

She opened a wall cabinet and woke a small monitor. A video filled the screen: Adam in a hospital bed, one hand strapped lightly to a frame, a cursor trembling above three words: pain, water, stop. His fingers did not move. The cursor still chose water before the nurse lifted the cup. Julia let the clip run again, this time with the prediction trace visible beneath it.

'That is the mercy version,' Julia said. She tapped another file and froze it before the image resolved. 'Now sell the same bridge to someone who wants obedience before refusal can form.'

Julia stopped beside a cabinet labelled with the previous day's date. 'The equipment was due to be moved after the Sunday validation run. Once Simpkin died, every person with a loose end became a scheduled problem.'

Roberts saw locked server cages, battery racks and black medical interface cabinets with blue status lights blinking behind mesh panels. He followed Julia along the painted route. She moved without hesitation, as if every turn had cost her something.

As they approached a crossroads, Roberts saw racking stretching out for a hundred metres across and around three hundred metres along the building. The racks rose to the roof. Julia slowed deliberately.

'I've taken you the scenic route,' she said.

'Thank you. Good to stretch my legs after the train journey; just what the doctor ordered. Are you sure our employer would want me to see this?'

'No. That's why I'm showing you.'

'Dangerous.'

A clipped bundle of printouts sat on the side table. The top page carried a single approval line in blue ink: P. Laws - transfer authority retained. Julia turned it face down before Roberts could read the rest.

'Useful.' She glanced at the rows of machines. 'If I disappear, you'll know where to start. If Laws lies to you, you'll know what he's lying about.'

They went through the door and arrived in reception. 'Meeting room upstairs,' Julia said. 'Laws said it would be midnight before he arrived, but Laws says whatever keeps other people waiting.' She swiped a plastic pass over the entry panel. The barrier opened. At the lift, the doors opened before she pressed a button.

Julia and Roberts entered; the doors shut, and they arrived at the second-floor corridor. Offices on either side of the passage had name plaques; Roberts read them as he passed.

One plaque had black letters on a white backing with the words: 'Dr J. Matthews.' Another door had the words: 'The Creator', engraved on gold coloured metal.

'Hope you're Dr Matthews and not The Creator?'

'Laws is self-important; he wishes I'd call him The Creator.' At the end of the passage, they entered a room containing a meeting table with twelve chairs; a screen hung from the wall at one end. The office was at the corner and glazed, but Roberts thought the view would bore, even in daylight. He sat in a chair at the top of the table facing the screen, a habit he'd picked up in briefings: less strain on the neck.

'Do you want a coffee?' Julia said.

'Decaf, this time of the day please. I'm hoping to sleep tonight.'

'Don't give up yet, Roberts.' Julia left the room.

The woman appeared interested in him, but Roberts no longer mistook interest for trust. Julia was making calculations. The unnerving part was that he did not yet know whether he was the risk she feared, the witness she needed, or the weapon she intended to use.

Julia returned a few minutes later with two coffees and her phone still lit in her hand. She placed Roberts' cup on the table, then turned the screen towards him briefly before locking it.

The last message was from Laws: DO NOT USE PATIENT LANGUAGE IN ANY TRANSFER NOTE. SUBJECT ONLY. FAMILY SIGNATURE OPTIONAL IF ROUTE STABLE.

'He cannot make it,' Julia said.

'Convenient.'

'For him, usually. Tonight, for me.'

'Can we get out of this place and get something to eat?'

'There are few late-night eateries around here. We've got microwave packs in the kitchen; come and help me cook.'

They moved to the galley. Julia opened the cupboard above the sink. Inside, microwave meal boxes stood in neat stacks.

'So, Roberts, we've got chilli, eggs and bacon and, my personal favourite, chicken curry.'

Roberts noticed how awake Julia looked; ready to drop. Roberts took two boxes of chicken curry, put them in the steel microwave and turned the dial; the machine hummed. 'I'm a vegetarian,' said Roberts, 'but I doubt the manufacturers of this meal box harmed any chickens.'

Julia handed Roberts two plastic knives and forks. 'Set the table please. I'll grab a bottle of wine from my office.'

'Do you often drink wine at work?'

'Only when I'm deciding whether to betray my employer.'

She left him with that. Roberts found napkins and two plastic cups. He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and trudged back to set places at the corner; it was too formal to eat facing across the table. Roberts

folded the paper napkins into crowns and placed them between the knives and forks, putting one paper cup at the tip of the knife for water and one to its right for wine; the microwave dinged.

A familiar aroma welcomed Roberts as he returned to the kitchen; it reminded him of army ration packs from his distant past, and the police cells from earlier that evening. The dried, long-life food smelled the same whichever variety you chose. Roberts suspected the contents of each box was the same; like the trick you could play on children by putting orange food colouring in apple juice and asking them to guess the flavour.

Roberts spooned the nutritious concoction onto paper plates, carried them into the meeting room and sat back at the table, leaving Julia the window view.

Julia returned carrying the wine. Her hair was damp, and the glasses had gone. Without them she looked less like a scientist and more like someone who had decided exactly what impression she wanted to leave. 'I had a quick shower.'

Roberts poured the water, so Julia had to choose the correct cups when she served the wine. They both ate the food and sipped, glancing at each other and then looking away.

'Laws should be here first thing tomorrow. You can sleep on the sofa in my office; there's an en-suite with towels.'

'What about you?'

'I'm renting a room in the village, and I'll head back soon.'

'You're too successful to rent a room, aren't you?'

'I had a lovely place in the city when I worked at the hospital. I sold it when the work became expensive in ways that had nothing to do with money.' She said it lightly, but her eyes went to the dark window. Roberts saw the cost of the project: not guilt exactly, but exile chosen so often it had become a home.

'What type of doctor are you?'

'A psychiatrist.'

'Hope you'll not mess with my mind.'

'Unlikely I'll influence your frontal lobe,' Julia said, 'but I may have unsettled your limbic system.' She stood before the line became something she could not take back. Attraction was useful; dependence was fatal. 'I've unlocked my office. Make yourself at home. I'll be back at eight. Don't mistake hospitality for trust.'

'See you tomorrow.'

'Good night.' Julia left without looking back.

Roberts opened an internet browser on his phone and searched a phrase: 'limbic system.'

ELEVEN

Andy came downstairs before anyone else and put the cycling bag by the kitchen door so he would not forget it when the police called. The purple bottle sat inside the zipped side pocket, cap taped down, the receipt note damp and half stuck to the plastic. The yellow duck's severed head was in a sandwich bag beside it. He wrote DO NOT TOUCH on a Post-it, then found the ink had bled through the cheap paper and stuck it to the bag anyway.

He tried the incident number again. A recorded voice told him his call mattered. At the far end of the line, someone else coughed, said please hold, and vanished into music. The frying pan was still on the hob from the night before. Sam's school shoes were in the middle of the floor. The house had begun without him.

Jess came in tying her dressing gown, hair still damp from the shower she always took before the boys properly woke. Her eyes went to the bag before they went to him. She knew Andy's habits too well: if he had labelled something, photographed it and still left it by the kitchen door, then his head was already somewhere else.

'Do you want eggs?' Jess said.

'Yes please; I'll make them.'

'How was your night with Steve?' Sam said.

'Not good, little man. Steve's missing; men in a transit van took him.'

'What would they want with Steve? Maybe they've taken him to their secret base?'

Andy rose from the kitchen table and removed a large frying pan from the drawer.

'What are you going to do?' Jess said.

Sam pointed at the cycling bag. The bottle's purple shoulder showed through the mesh side pocket. 'What's that one? Is it juice?'

'No,' Jess said. 'Andy, put that somewhere safe. The garage. Now.'

Andy looked at the pan, the unanswered call, the Post-it curling at one corner. He lifted the whole bag, then the phone clicked and a new voice came on the line asking for the incident reference.

'In a minute,' he said, lowering the bag back into the exact place Max had seen it every Saturday morning of his life. 'I have them on the phone.'

The line went quiet, then dead. Andy stared at the screen, waiting for it to reconnect. The small practical job by the door slipped one place lower in the queue of panic.

Jess opened the kitchen door. 'Max, breakfast.' A thundering noise came from above, and a large shape filled the door frame and sat at the table.

'Morning Popster, good night with Steve?' said Max. He wore his old Hitchin rugby shorts and one sock, the other hanging from his mouth because he was trying to make Sam laugh. A revision timetable was inked on the back of his hand and already smudged. On any other morning Andy would have told him he was too old to be an idiot before laughing anyway.

'It wasn't great, Steve got kidnapped by men in a van.' Andy served the eggs.

'Have you called the police?'

'I'm waiting for them to call me.' He heard how weak that sounded and hated it.

'So, what happened?'

'I walked into the bar, came back out, and the women with Steve said men had bundled him into a van.'

'You didn't mention women,' Jess said.

'Didn't think it was relevant.'

Max ate a large chunk of the egg. 'Yow! Hot! Where's the water?' He stood and walked to the sink.

'Fill the jug would you Max please. Who were these women?'

'I don't know. Steve talked to them while the police took my statement.'

Max came back to the table with a jug of water and put it down in the middle. He had the cycling bottle in his other hand, already open.

'Any glasses?' Andy said.

'Sam can get them. Where did you buy that drink from?'

'What drink?' Andy looked at the cycling bag. The side pocket was empty. The Post-it lay face down on the tiles, stuck to a damp crescent where the bottle had been.

For one second he saw the kitchen as a stranger would see it: a familiar sports bottle, a familiar bag, a note that had fallen off, a busy father half listening to a dead phone line.

'Yes, I thought it was one of those electrolyte drinks from your bike bag. It was in your bottle, Dad. I watered it down because it looked strong. It's sweet, like an energy drink but flat. It gives you a buzz.' Max circled the room, still trying to make the mistake sound ordinary because ordinary mistakes were allowed in this house.

'How much did you drink?'

'I poured it into a pint glass and topped it up with water. I was expecting blackcurrant, but this has a serious kick.' Max circled the room.

'Andy, we need to get him checked. I told you to move that bottle.' Jess's voice shook, which was worse than anger. She did not say the rest: you heard me, you chose the phone, you put the job before the small safe thing.

'Let's go, big man, I'll take you down to Accident and Emergency, just in case.'

'Not A&E; I'm fine.' Max was breathing fast.

'We're going. Get your shoes on and get in the car or I'll block your phone internet.'

Max put on an expensive pair of trainers. Andy grabbed the bottle and went through to his office and took his car key from his desk drawer.

'I'll call you from the hospital, you stay here and look after Sam.'

'If anything happens to him; it's your fault.'

Andy and Max crossed the drive to the black Passat estate. 'Are you all right, big man?' Andy started the engine. Jess and Sam watched from the front door, their faces pale in the glass. Andy gave them a nod he hoped looked reassuring; it felt like a lie.

'If he dies can I have his gaming chair?' Sam said to Jess.

Max rocked backwards and forward in his seat as the Passat turned left at the roundabout. Andy pushed his right foot down until the needle hit eighty mph. It was a single-carriageway road but wide. On most days, Andy would stick to the sixty limit, but not today.

'You always asked how fast this could go, Max.' Max was breathing quicker and quicker.

'Let's see Dad. I don't feel great now. My brain seems like it will explode.' He gripped the sides of his chair, and his face was pale.

Andy floored it and switched on the hazards. The needle climbed through ninety, then a hundred. The motorway blurred at the edges.

Andy came up behind an Audi A8 in lane three and undercut him in lane two. The man in the Audi put his index finger and thumb together and shook his wrist. Andy wasn't looking in his mirror and didn't see. Lane three was clear for another five minutes, and they got to the slip road exit for the hospital.

He could call again. He could wait. He could explain the tag, the duck, the failed email and the number on the photograph to another voice on another line. Max did not have that kind of time.

The problem had changed shape in the space of a breakfast. Steve's bag had been evidence. The duck had been evidence. The bottle had become his son. Andy stopped trying to make the police understand the whole story and chose the part that was still breathing beside him.

It was not a decision to abandon Steve. It was the first honest triage of the morning. Steve was already somewhere Andy could not reach by speed, strength or a better statement; Max was in the passenger seat, turning pale beside him, and that made every other duty step back.

‘Dad, I’ll pass out soon. You’d better get us close.’

Andy took the exit against a red light after one hard look left and right. A BMW sounded its horn as the Passat cut across the roundabout. Andy’s heart hammered as if he were back on the beach five years earlier, turning to find Sam gone.

Andy breathed and opened both windows as the car slowed down to forty miles per hour in a thirty limit.

He saw the red and white sign for the hospital and pulled into the car park. Andy wouldn’t be paying the parking charge today. He followed the signs for A&E and reversed his car tight up to the hospital doors. A few ambulances and drivers lined up along the road.

‘You OK Max?’

‘Hanging in there?’ Max pulled the door lever. ‘Dad, I can’t get out, I’ll fall.’

Andy got out of the car and saw an ambulance man walking to his vehicle. ‘Can you help please mate, my son’s taken something and can’t get out the car.’

‘Sorry mate, can’t help; we’re just about to go out, go into reception, you’ll find someone in there.’

Andy ran into the reception. A queue with two police officers, a drunk and a mother with a child in front. A nurse approached.

‘My son’s in the car and can’t get out; he’s taken something.’

‘Get him booked in at the front desk.’

Andy joined the queue and hated himself for it. Five minutes passed. Every second he stayed, Max was alone in the car. Every second he left, he risked losing the only route to help. He fixed his eyes on the back of a stranger’s coat and listened for a shout from outside.

When the receptionist finally looked up, Andy stepped forward before fear could talk him into waiting properly. It was not a decision he could defend perfectly. It was only the decision he could live with.

‘Next please,’ said the woman from behind the glass screen. Andy approached and relayed the situation.

‘Do you think it could be drugs or alcohol?’

‘I don’t know, could be a chemical, he’s not looking good, can we get him in as soon as possible please?’

‘I’ll just need a few details: name, date of birth, family doctor.’

Andy gave details.

‘Right, we’ll get him straight into RESUS.’ She emerged from behind the screen with a wheelchair.

‘Thanks,’ said Andy. He pushed the wheelchair, and a nurse followed him. They arrived at the Passat where Max slumped in his seat.

‘Can you hear me Max?’ Max didn’t respond. Andy hauled him out of the car seat and into the chair. He handed the purple bottle to the nurse and said, ‘Take

this please, which way to RESUS?’

TWELVE

'Blanks?' Steve said.

'I guess so,' Jamie said.

'We're not trying to kill you?' The bear said. 'We're builders, not gangsters.'

'But you do a sideline in kidnapping?' Jamie moved clear of the planter. 'There are three of you, four if we count your mate on the floor. I've broken your wrist and your guns are full of blanks. Put them down, hands where I can see them, then stand by that wall.'

'Your mate is over in block B of the old asylum.'

'What are we doing here?'

'The boss said we had guests and not to let them leave.'

'Do you have replica guns just lying about?'

'Those pistols are site scare guns: gas and blank conversions for making noise on empty jobs. Rand likes props that look frightening and keep cheap men obedient. His ex-security lads carry the real kit. We're the cheap end, not the clever end.'

'Who's Bill?'

'Bill Rand, our boss.'

'You're looking at kidnapping. What you tell me in the next five minutes may decide whether I remember you as frightened or stupid. I recommend frightened.'

'I'm not one for beard cream. Bill was here this morning at about 7.30 a.m. He closed the site and sent the few subcontractors home under a contamination excuse. Rand's crew showed us the rooms where they were keeping you and told us we were not guarding prisoners, just keeping two confused men indoors until a transport job came back. That was the line. It sounded less criminal if you didn't ask the next question.'

'Did you not feel that was crossing a line?'

'I've crossed a few lines, and I've been lucky to keep this job for a few years. When you check me out, you'll find out why. Ranto was the only employer interested in me, the last time I was looking. Anyway, I was checking on you, and you weren't there, I opened the door to your room and the rest you know.'

'I can't remember anything after eight o'clock last night, when Bob Simpkin's Tesla locked us inside it in Covent Garden. Tell me what you know, or I'll write bad things about you for fun.'

'Bill's in with all kinds of characters. A man doing work for us got the car as part of a contract; the man was weird and built secure courier systems. The Tesla wasn't driving itself. It was a rolling safe: deadlocks, blacked-out glass, a hidden tracker and a concealed ventilation loop. Once you opened the stored route, it

sent a collection signal. Rand's men lifted the whole car out on a recovery truck. By the time they opened it here, you were easy to move.'

The fight had drained Jamie. He had eaten nothing since the night before, and the last of the adrenaline was burning off. 'Get Rob and get us out. Do that, and I'll do what I can to keep you out of prison.'

Jamie heard the shot after the damage. Something hot and wet slapped across his face and neck. Steve dropped beside him, already gone. For one useless instant Jamie saw him outside the pub, joking over drinks, still alive because the evening had not yet become this. Then the next bullet struck the brickwork and Jamie ran for the wall.

A blue door sat to his right. Yale lock. One Yale key on the bunch. He found it by touch, turned it, and slipped into another corridor as a bullet sparked off the brickwork behind him.

Ahead stood a single-storey building: brick to waist height, glass above, several panes smashed and boarded. Jamie needed cover, not a perfect exit.

He took three strides, launched himself through a broken window and rolled across the rug inside. Glass opened his heel. Blood warmed his sock.

Masks hung on the wall; skeletons, demons and clowns. Tubes of paint and brushes littered the desks. Stacks of tape and paper sat on a table, near a door. Jamie crawled over to the table, keeping below the window

line. He grabbed a few towels and a roll of tape; he stepped through the door into a glazed stairwell. On the wall were a fire extinguisher and an AED defibrillator machine. Jamie thought high ground would be the best choice. He climbed the stairs and left blood stains on the treads, taking the stairs two at a time and running around the half landing. He bolted up the final flight, turned left along the upper corridor and entered the first door.

The room was a science lab: bookcases, measuring cylinders, benches and gas taps for Bunsen burners. Through the windows, Jamie saw other buildings; glass bridges connected the separate blocks.

He wrapped his foot with paper towels and tape. The blood on the stairs might pass for spilt paint from the art room. It was a weak hope, but hope was still better than standing still.

He pulled out his phone, dialled 999 and spoke to the operator.

'Urgent assistance, officers in danger, a man shot, P.C. Jamie Wilmot Metropolitan Police.'

'What's your location?' the operator said.

'Don't know, trace this call the best you can?'

'Please hold,' the operator said.

Jamie placed the call on hold and called Amy.

Amy answered. 'Jamie?'

Jamie made out footsteps on the stairs. 'Amy, listen, I might not have much time. I'll keep the signal on as long as I can, but I need you to get help here; we need Tactical Support Group and Firearms. I don't know where I am. Green perimeter fence, red-brick blocks, old school or hospital grounds, fields inside the fence. The 999 operator is tracing the cell site, but that only narrows it. Get Baker to search old institutions within that sector. Did you get that?'

'Yes, what happened?'

Jamie heard footsteps on the half landing. 'Gotta go,' he ended the call. Underneath the desk was a set of drawers. In them were orange rubber hoses to connect the Bunsen burners to the gas taps on the desk. Jamie pulled one out of the drawer.

The footsteps were closer now, in the same room.

They've followed the breadcrumbs.

Jamie poked his head around the table and saw a lean man dressed in black trousers and a black T-shirt. He was around thirty years old and stick thin. He was the gunman that shot Steve, and he had his pistol out ready.

Jamie was a sitting duck; as soon as the gunman came around the corner of the desk Jamie would be visible. No exits, so running was not a choice; to attack was the only option, but it would be difficult against a man armed with a handgun.

The blood trail led all the way to the teacher's desk, which gave Jamie an advantage; he knew his target's course: following the blood trail. Jamie listened to the footsteps and judged the gunman to be halfway across the room.

The attacker fired three shots; the bullets went through the desk and ripped through the containers of bungees. They all missed Jamie and lodged in the plasterboard wall behind the table. The gunman needed to get close to make sure; riskier for the gunman, but Jamie had no sympathy.

The footsteps approached the edge of the desk, Jamie crawled around the other side, held one end of the rubber hose in his left hand and stretched it around the back of his neck. He pulled it tight, aimed low, and let go. The rubber hose flew past the desk, past the gunman's knee and hit the wall with a thud. The quick spin of the gunman's head was all the time Jamie needed; Jamie burst from cover and grabbed the gun in his right hand.

The man smashed his forehead into Jamie's nose, and the room split into light and noise. Jamie caught the wrist because there was no other choice, but his taped foot skidded in his own blood and he had to hook one elbow over the table edge to stop himself going down.

The wrist bent past its limit. The killer gasped and hooked Jamie in the temple with his free hand. One more of those and it would be over.

Jamie wrenched down. Snap. The gun fell. He tried to drive a heel into the man's gut and nearly missed because his leg would not answer cleanly. The second kick landed lower and uglier, sending the man stumbling over a chair. Jamie followed with a stamp hard enough to end the fight, then gripped the bench until the sickness passed.

As the killer writhed on the floor, Jamie picked up the gun. Jamie's head throbbed; he was about to throw up and pass out. He aimed the pistol at the prone figure's chest and fired three times.

THIRTEEN

'Where is he?' Amy said.

'You can ask him yourself,' the car park attendant said, and pointed to Amy's phone that flashed on the tabletop. 'You'd better take that call.'

Amy picked up her phone and answered. 'Jamie?'

'Amy, listen, I might not have much time. I'll keep the signal on as long as I can, but I need you to get help here; we need Tactical Support Group and Firearms. I don't know where I am. Green perimeter fence, red-brick blocks, old school or hospital grounds, fields inside the fence. The 999 operator is tracing the cell site, but that only narrows it. Get Baker to search old institutions within that sector. Did you get that?'

'Yes, what happened?'

'Gotta go.' The line dropped.

Amy looked at the tracking app and realised that the blue dot had moved about 30 miles North of her current location.

She did not have the language for it yet, but she recognised the shape: a green tick standing where a human confirmation should have been.

Amy thought of the custody screen, the green tick and the provider reference that had made refusal unreasonable. Now Jamie was talking about an old institution and a moving blue dot, and the same shape sat beneath it: a routine entry, a changed instruction, someone else's authority borrowed at the point where a person ought to have stopped and asked why.

Amy dialled 999 and called it in using a junction of road names; she also booked on duty. 'Is there anywhere I can hire a car around here?'

'There are places around here, but you need not bother with them, I'll drive you.' The woman picked up a bag from the table, took out a key and clicked it. The lights on a new white Fiat 500 flashed. 'Let's go then.'

The attendant walked out of the small room and towards the Fiat, threw her bag in the back and got in the driving seat; Amy got in the passenger door.

'Can I have a look at that map on your phone, please?' said the woman. Amy showed her the phone. 'That place is Quercus college where my son studied twenty years ago; it's moved to a new location now, and they're converting the old buildings to housing.'

'Thanks, I appreciate it.'

'I'd like to pretend that I'm doing you a favour, but I'd much rather spend a few hours chatting to you than moping around this place.'

'What's your name?'

'Janet.'

Janet pulled up the ramp and out into the morning sunshine. Amy tried to call Jamie a few times, but it connected straight to voicemail and she updated control via 999. Janet navigated through the traffic and impressed Amy with her skill; every gear change was perfect; Janet get through the lights just before they turned amber, without breaking the speed limit.

The traffic sped up as they drove up the A41, through Hendon. They passed Aerodrome Road, and Amy looked left; the police training college was out of sight.

'Did you enjoy your time at Hendon?' Janet said.

'Every minute, I met great friends, and loved being with so many people.'

'Is that where you met Jamie?'

'No, I met him when I started on the borough, he had a few more years experience than me.'

Janet joined the A1, just a few more miles to go until they were through Borehamwood and onto the motorway.

'I might have seen Jamie and his colleague last night,' Janet said. 'When I checked the ticket machine on the lower level, I glimpsed a blue Tesla going up the ramp. I only glanced the driver and passenger for a second, at most, but I remember seeing black-and-white clothing. Normally a different man drives that car.'

‘What time?’

‘About eight o’clock?’

‘Can you remember the registration plate?’

She wrote four headings on the back of a receipt: bag, doctor, truck, PKL. It was too neat, and she knew it was too neat, but separate headings were how people kept separate incidents from pretending not to know each other.

‘Yes, the driver has been parking with us for a few months.’

Amy called in with the information and asked for a vehicle check.

‘Registered to a company Amy: Ranto Construction, headquarters in Colchester,’ said the voice from control.

Amy looked up Ranto, using the internet browser on her phone. The company had been going for around thirty years, and the founders were Bill Rand and Mick Tomlinson. Ranto turned over around £500 million a year and built industrial buildings: warehouses, distribution and logistics warehouses, but also had residential projects and offices on their website.

‘About another ten minutes Amy.’ Janet’s voice seemed clearer and deeper now, and the cough had gone.

They pulled off the dual carriageway and onto suburban roads, driving in silence until they reached the destination.

'Here it is Amy, Quercus.' Janet parked in a side street, opposite the college.

They exited the car and crossed to the junction of the side street and the main road. Amy studied the front of the college building but could not make out how far back it extended.

A green fence encircled the red brick building; advertising boards hung from the hoarding with the words: 'High quality three and four-bedroom homes from Daisy Field Developments. Quercus offers a superb standard of living for you and your family.'

Amy crossed the road to have a closer look. Construction workers strolled around inside the perimeter. Amy looked closer at the hoarding which had logos of the architect and consulting engineer. Above these logos was one that looked like a capital R, in red, with the word: 'Ranto' written in capitals below it. Above the logo were the words: 'Main contractor - Ranto Construction.'

'Maybe we should give this chap a call?' Janet pointed to another board. Written on the board was: 'Site Manager - Ted Mackey.' a phone number next to the name.

'Let's wait, units will be here soon.'

Janet took out her phone and called Ted Mackey.

'Yep,' came the voice from the phone.

'Is that Ted?'

'Speaking.'

'I'm outside your front gate, and my dog has run through the railings and I saw your number on the board.'

'I'll come over.' The line went dead.

Two minutes later, a man emerged from the front gate. 'Are you the woman that called?' Mackey was a bear of a man, and his right arm was in a sling.

'Yes, Toto just ran through the railing, can we come in and explore?'

'How can a dog get through the gap in that railing?'

'He's a chihuahua; my granddaughter here bought it for me for Christmas; she might care for him soon,' Janet coughed. 'That could be the death rattle.'

'We're fine waiting here.' Amy said. 'We'd appreciate it if you'd check though.' Amy looked around the streets. Mackey watched her.

The sound of the siren was barely audible.

'Sure, you can come in and search. We must escort you while you're on site though. Come over here, and I'll let you in.' Mackey ambled to a gate with a turnstile, swiped a card on a reader and walked through it. 'Come on then, are you coming in or not?'

Amy looked at Janet. 'I'll wait in the car. I suggest you do the same.'

'Don't worry love, we don't bite. You'll not let your Grandma do all the work will you.'

Janet pushed through the turnstile.

'I'll wait here,' Amy said.

Mackey and Janet walked into a Portakabin close to the site entrance.

The first police car arrived and then a second. A van with wire mesh over the windscreen arrived; officers in armour occupied it.

A uniformed officer, with three pips on his epaulettes, got out of the first vehicle. He was thin, with flecks of grey in his short white hair. Amy spoke to him, 'Sir, I'm Amy Trimble, Met police, I made the call.'

'You're Jack Trimble's daughter?'

'That's right. I got a lift here with a lady from a car park, and she has gone into the site. I couldn't think of a way to stop her. She's in that Portakabin now.'

Janet and Mackey came out of the temporary building, she and Mackey walked over to the fence.

'Janet?' the police inspector said.

'Hello Ed.'

'We need to come into your site; we think missing people are out here.' The inspector said to Mackey.

'No problem mate.' I'll open the main gate. Mackey strode over to the Portakabin and entered.

'You're looking good Ed,' Janet said. 'I guess Rosie's keeping you in good shape.'

'How's the leg? You seem to be moving around OK.'

'Your idea of OK is different to mine. I can get around, but I won't be chasing too many folks.'

'Janet, can you see what that man is up to?'

Janet popped her head inside the hut and then returned. 'He's not in there; there's a door through to another building.'

'Time for you to come out Janet.'

'We both know it won't happen.'

'Janet, this may not end well, you're in real danger.'

More police cars arrived, and officers armed with rifles, and wearing body armour, got out.

'I'm not in danger Ed, because I've been dead for twenty years anyway. Amy what's your number? I'll tell you what I find; there's no need for me to be a hero anymore.'

Janet walked away from the fence.

'Why did you let her in there alone?' Ed said to Amy.

'I'm sorry.'

FOURTEEN

Roberts woke on the leather sofa around five a.m. He'd closed the blinds in the office, but they weren't a patch on the blackout curtains found in decent hotels. Roberts was as tough as they came, but he'd learned to appreciate the more refined things in life. He'd try to avoid rough sleeping, even when working, but Dr Julia Matthews hadn't offered an alternative.

The office was more spacious than the meeting room, and he guessed that Julia had taken the first pick when they'd come up for grabs. On the big wall behind the sofa was an enormous painting. It wasn't clear to Roberts what the colours on the picture represented, and he looked closer: Ladies dancing? Naked ladies? Opposite the sofa, on a glass coffee table, lay an Economist magazine, still in its cellophane, a Nature magazine, and two old copies of the Lancet. Roberts glanced at the address on a magazine mailing label: 'Unit 1, PKL building, Grassmoor Road, Dry Molbury, Lincolnshire'

There had been no sign of any houses during the drive from the station. Perhaps the builders had demolished a village to build the monster PKL building. Roberts walked over to the en-suite in his boxer shorts and showered with water set to lukewarm. For his second

shower of the day, in the evening, Roberts would choose the cold setting during the summer months. There was soap in a dish and two bottles of shampoo in the shower tray; he picked up the shampoo: 'Super Blonde Colour.'

He used a squirt of the shampoo; Roberts thought Julia wouldn't mind, and it made him feel intimate with her. Roberts was losing his touch if this was intimate. The second bottle was the same brand but was conditioner. Roberts had never understood the purpose of conditioner but had used it by mistake when staying with women. He'd found that it took longer to rinse out than shampoo and left a chemical coating to the hair. Roberts always avoided conditioner on principle and placed the bottle back on the floor in the shower tray.

Towels hung on a rail just outside the cubicle. Roberts took one, towelled himself dry and tied it around his waist. A basin and a mirrored cabinet clung to the wall, and under the cupboard was a ledge that held blusher brushes, tweezers, exfoliating scrubs, primers and other products. Roberts didn't understand the purpose of many of the items, but he appreciated that Julia had left a new toothbrush out for him.

While he brushed his teeth, he wondered if Dr Matthews had regular late-night sofa guests. Roberts was a curious man, but didn't open the mirrored cabinet; Julia had left him out everything he needed.

Roberts padded back into the office, got dressed and then searched the room; there was nothing of interest. His appointment with Julia wasn't until eight, and he

had time to kill, which meant he could search around The Creator's office.

Approaching the Creator's door, he studied the name plaque. Next to the writing was a picture or symbol, three dots and then a circle with lines emanating. Was it the sun?

Roberts walked into the room which was the opposite of Julia's. The odour was stale and unpleasant, the walls were undecorated, and documents on the floor, arranged in stacks.

Drawings of the PKL building littered one corner of the room. Roberts looked at the sheet on top: Elevation - Grid Line N - As-built.

The drawing showed a cross section through the building across its short length. There wasn't much information on it. A few columns and beams supporting the steel roof rafters. What caught Roberts's attention was the lift shaft continuing to an underground level, and a basement across the whole width of the building.

Like Julia, The Creator had a set of magazines, his were from the top shelf of the newsagent, though, and scattered across the floor among other detritus, including crisp packets and empty beer cans. In the corner, Roberts found the prize, a dried turd. Roberts hoped that the man owned a dog.

The more pleasant surroundings of Julia's office tempted him back, and he walked towards the door. A wall planner hung from it, a freebie from a tyre shop with a

picture of a Lamborghini with a model in the top left. The wall planner had arrows drawn down the months. From 5th January to 30th June a labelled black line: DARKNESS. 1st July to 31 August a similar yellow line: GENESIS. 31st August until the end of September was a red line: EXODUS. The Creator had a sense of the dramatic.

Roberts left and stretched back on Julia's sofa, closed his eyes and rested. His phone beeped; the message was a job offer for today but down in Hertfordshire. Roberts was about to decline, but Deakin accepted it first, anyway. Roberts fell asleep until Julia woke him at 11.00 a.m.

'Rise and shine. Sorry, I'm late, but you looked like you needed the rest.'

'Morning.' Roberts thought her scent was not perfume but expensive shower gel, the kind he'd sometimes used when staying in hotels above the budget range.

'I've got a choice of breakfast for you this morning. All-day breakfast from the kitchen or a choice of fresh pastries and coffee from the petrol station.' Julia pointed to the coffee table, towards a paper bag and two takeaway coffee cups.

'The All-day breakfast is tempting, but it might taste the same as last night's curry, so let's go with pastries, thanks.'

'Sleep OK?'

'I slept great. Shame though, it's the first time I've had dinner and breakfast with someone in a long time; there should have been something in between the two meals.'

'You looked tired last night, and you might have a busy day today.' They ate the coffee and pastries. Julia chose an Almond Croissant and Roberts went for the Cinnamon Swirl, which he judged to contain more calories.

'I had a snoop around our employer's office. Looks like he might be a nut job?'

'Laws is at the boundaries of the bell curve.'

'Is he your boyfriend?'

'I already told you I don't have one. Laws is not my type anyway, not anyone's type. Laws has no interest in sex, not in the way most people are.'

'Why have you ended up working for such a loser?'

'I could ask you the same question, and my answer would be the same.'

'I'm sure you could have paid the mortgage fixing broken brains. No need to spend your time with a man with dog turds on his carpet if you're doing it for money.'

'I don't have the money to buy all this. I needed a sponsor.'

'You need all this for medical research?'

'There has been mission creep. I'll get my answers, but it's not my vision.'

'So, why am I here?'

'I'll see if he tells you when he gets here. I wouldn't want him to realise it's come from me, and it's easier for you to deny if you know nothing.'

'So what are you doing tonight?'

'The weekend starts from twelve o'clock, and I'll go for a run, do my laundry and then I'll cook dinner for one, and watch a movie with a bottle of wine. I'll be asleep by eleven p.m. Why are you so interested in my plans?'

'You don't want to talk about work and I hate silence, and I need to fill the gaps. I can't bear the sexual tension between us.'

'You sense sexual tension between us?'

'I think I sense it.'

'No. You feel it. The part of the brain governing sexual attraction doesn't do much thinking, not of the logical sort anyway; it reacts and makes instant decisions based on our senses. The same bit of brain that would make you run if you saw a tiger in the street. It's becoming redundant in our modern world; there are few tigers walking the streets.'

'I saw on TV that a tiger escaped from the zoo last week; the vet shot darts at it and stunned it in the street. Who said the emotional bit of the brain is redundant.'

'The emotional centre of the brain also jumps to conclusions and forces us to decide before we've got all the facts. This can lead to paranoia, antisocial behaviour and cause a lot of suffering. Brain biology can't evolve quick enough to keep up with environmental changes.'

'I decide fast, and my decisions are usually right. Us being here having this conversation proves it.'

'I know a little about you Roberts; you've been around the block, done plenty of training and made mistakes that haven't killed you?'

Roberts nodded.

'When you've had a lot of practice in a particular field, then it's OK to trust your instincts. Brains make electrical connections based on our experience, and we become hard-wired to execute certain tasks without conscious thought. If a situation is unfamiliar, then you'd do well to analyse it, as your instincts could lead to poor choices. If a human could analyse all the data and calculate the probabilities, most outcomes would be very different.'

'You know how to deflect a conversation.'

'Not at all, would you like to go out for dinner tonight?'

'Sure, I look forward to it. I sense my mind expanding just sitting in the same room as you, maybe I'll be able to have an intelligent conversation with you tomorrow.'

'I know lots of people I can have an intelligent conversation with. There's no need for us to do that. It

would be great if you'd join me on my run though, you look like you might give me a push with my marathon training.'

'Sounds like the best Saturday plans I've had in a while.'

As Roberts finished his coffee, a dog barked outside in the corridor.

FIFTEEN

'Is he going to be OK?' Andy said to the doctor.

'It depends. Do you know what he might have taken?'

Andy gave the doctor the purple bottle. 'He's taken this; it was in a cycling bottle. My fault for leaving it around the kitchen.' The words came out flat and official, as if he were giving evidence against himself. Behind them sat the worse truth: Jess had told him, Sam had heard it, and Max had paid for the delay.

'So, what is it, a cleaning fluid or something?'

'I don't know. It's a long story, but something shaped like a duck split open in water and released this liquid. I've still got the head of the duck.' Andy gave the duck's head to the doctor. 'It felt like a disguised sample carrier, not a toy.'

'A bath bomb?'

'Maybe but I doubt it. Someone hid it in my friend's luggage and its owners are trying to get it back.'

'I'll get it analysed. Your son is stable and sedated to allow him to rest.'

'Can I wait here?'

‘Yes, we’ll be moving him soon to the ward, but you’ll be fine to stay with him.’ The doctor left the room.

Andy phoned Jess. ‘He’s OK, no need to worry, you can take Sam to his party and come over later.’ He kept his voice level by gripping the edge of the plastic chair until his knuckles paled. He could still see the Post-it face down on the kitchen tiles.

When he ended the call, Andy kept the phone in his hand. He wanted Jess there, and he feared seeing her face. Both things were true, and neither helped Max breathe.

‘What did the doctor say?’

‘They’re doing tests, but he’s fine. I’ve got to go; the doctor wants me to fill in a form. Speak later.’ Andy sat alone in the room. He had lied to his wife without remorse, and now the lie left him alone with Max.

Andy checked his phone; no messages from the police about Steve, no missed call that could undo the last twelve hours. He had been awake all night and could not think of anything useful he could do to help either Steve or Max. That uselessness was the thing he hated most. He could lift, chase, drive too fast, break rules. He could not make the phone ring or put the bottle back in the garage where Jess had told him to put it.

Andy held Max’s hand. He’d not done it for a few years, and it felt good. Max slept with the same expression that Andy saw in that cot back in the hospital eighteen years ago. Eighteen years that made Max; eighteen years that

made Andy.

Andy watched Max sleep. The plastic chair pressed into his thighs. Max's hand felt too warm and too small inside his.

SIXTEEN

Amy milled around in the street amongst the cars, vans and officers. The inspector's chastisement had been light, and he'd delivered it more like a question than a criticism, but Amy couldn't get it out of her mind: 'Why did you let her in there alone?'

Amy had put a civilian in danger and kept herself safe. She'd tried to keep Janet from going into the college and failed. Why did she have so little influence? With no uniform, she appeared more like she was going shopping than on duty, but Janet would have paid more attention to Rob.

Jamie had called Amy: 'Cassandra.' It had been one evening while she recounted her day to him over a bottle of wine. He only half listened, and he would have preferred to be reading his book, *The Iliad* by Homer. Amy knew of the Trojan horse from school but not the details that Jamie had learned through his bedtime reading.

Apollo cursed Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, to utter prophecies that would come true but that no one would believe. Jamie said, 'Amy, you were right, you're always right but why does no one ever listen to you. There's no point moaning

every night.'

Amy could have left the conversation there; she knew Jamie didn't want to talk; he never wanted to talk. Amy carried on though.

'I knew I should have arrested him, he'd caused damage, and it was a good enough reason to get him out of the house.'

'I wish you'd arrested him too. Then you'd still be booking him in, and I could read my book.'

'Phil didn't want to arrest that late in the shift, he wanted to get home on time. He said the damage to the lipstick was slight and not enough to make an arrest.'

'Phil's a lazy bastard; you should have arrested the man. The arrest would have boosted your figures and kept Thomas off your back for a day or two.'

Sergeant Thomas was Amy's nemesis. Amy still remembered his first words to her after she'd finished her street duties course and joined his team. Thomas had spoken to each new probationer.

'Amy is it? I expect you to be out there looking for work, be proactive. We've got enough sad sacks around here already. Do the work, and you'll have no problems from me.' That was the best conversation she'd had with Thomas.

The last two years had been miserable. Amy had struggled to tick off the different tasks in her binder, and her arrest record was poor. Amy achieved limited

success; she'd attended three sudden deaths and dealt well with the families of the deceased, but it hadn't eased her ride with Thomas.

Thomas was a professional, and would never use nicknames or bully anyone. The PCs with five or six years' experience were different. If Amy had been a boy, then the other officers would have come up with some cruel nicknames for her. 'Deadwood,' had been at Hendon with Amy, and she imagined his early career had been as miserable as hers.

Amy watched the female officers, a few years older than her, some of them acting sergeants, better than the men, decisive and experienced. Amy didn't have the same drive. Did she want it? Yes, but she didn't love it, she knew she didn't belong, these were not her people.

The best thing in her life was Jamie. Amy remembered their first date; it was a pleasant walk. It started at the morning briefing.

'I need two volunteers for foot patrol in the high street,' Thomas said. No hands raised. Never volunteer. Amy remembered her Dad's words.

'Jamie take Amy for a walk will you and show her how to do it,' Thomas said.

Thomas was one of the few officers to like Jamie. The other officers sensed that Jamie was different and maybe dangerous. They didn't bully him; but left him alone. Thomas was always chatting to Jamie. He'd say things like, 'How's it going son. I was going through

your process, and that was a great piece of work yesterday, keep it up.'

Jamie would smile and say 'Thanks, Sarge.' It was the epitome of a professional relationship. Thomas would joke around with the other experienced officers; with Jamie, he wouldn't get personal.

Rob was Jamie's only real friend in the job; Jamie had experience and was competent but couldn't drive, which made him first choice operator.

Amy felt that there was something else that made Rob and Jamie get on. Rob had all kinds of things going on outside the job, and he liked to tell Jamie about new inventions from his shed, and to hang around with him.

Rob didn't get to hang around with Jamie on that warm June day a year ago though. Amy did.

'Right then Amy, let's get your binder looking better,' Jamie said as they walked out of the police station. They were wearing shirt sleeves with a stab vest on top and high visibility jackets over. Amy's stab vest stop just above her belly button and looked like a crop top. Either the storeman was joking, or she had a long back compared to her shoulder width.

'Get that changed. It won't do much good if someone aims lower than your chest,'

This man will be full of advice and opinions, Amy thought. She'd been correct in her assessment.

They walked down the pavement in the expensive neighbourhood; it had been Amy's first choice borough. A man got into a new Volvo estate and pulled away from the kerb. Jamie stopped in the road in front of him and put his hand up. The man paused, and Jamie walked around to the driver's window.

'Can you get out of the car please mate?' The man wore brogues, chinos and an expensive white shirt. 'You weren't wearing a seatbelt.'

'Sorry.'

'There are no points for that, but it is a ticket, and a sixty pound fine.'

'You're joking; I would have put it on down the road.'

'Amy, can you take it from here please?' Amy took the fixed penalty notice out of the pouch on her belt.

'Can I take your name and address please?' Amy said.

'Are you joking? It's just a seatbelt.'

'You can request a court hearing if you'd prefer,' Jamie said. 'It's more writing for us but no problem, we still need your name and address though.'

The man reddened and was rocking back and forward. The man gave his name and address. Amy name-checked him, and he came back no trace.

Amy issued the ticket and put the carbon copy into her pouch. The man drove off. 'Questions?' Jamie said to her.

‘Did we need to do that? We’ve just ruined his Saturday morning.’

‘Do you know better than the lawmakers? Think about yourself too. Don’t you want to get Thomas off your back? One down, four to go.’

‘What?’

‘You’ll get five bits of paperwork today. You’ve got to set yourself targets.’

Two girls, sixteen years old, paraded towards them wearing flip flops, shorts and bomber jackets. Jamie stopped them. ‘Hello there, what are you up to today Charlene; shopping? Those coats look warm.’

‘Nothing,’ the taller of the girls said. ‘You can’t stop and question us, we’re not doing anything.’

‘I can ask you whatever questions I want. Are you in a rush? Those coats look hot for this time of year. I’m detaining you for a search. My grounds are you’re wearing coats I suspect you of using to conceal stolen property, and that you were evasive when asked to account for them. My colleague here will search you, and then we’ll give you a form.’

Amy searched the girls and found nothing but mobile phones in their pockets.

‘No money?’ Amy said. The girls didn’t reply and didn’t smile. Amy went through the details on the forms, gave them both a copy and sent them on their way, she put the carbon copies in her pouch.

'Two for the price of one there Amy. You're on fire today.'

'It's not why I joined the police. Those girls were doing nothing.'

'They'll be raiding the shops this afternoon.'

They carried on walking down the street and arrived at a roundabout.

'Take your hi-vis off Amy. Let's wait here a while.' Jamie stepped back from the road a little.

It was an unlucky day for the BMW driver who jumped a red light and found Jamie stood in the road with his hand up. The driver considered carrying on but stopped.

Amy's fourth bit of writing for the day. The man was boiling with rage, and Jamie hoped that they might get more than another ticket, but six points and a fine would do. Amy felt no sense of shame issuing this ticket. The man was a middle-class thug, everything she hated.

'One more for a full house Amy, and then we'll get in for some lunch, you can do your writing, and we'll be off on time. You got plans for tonight?'

Amy had been about to reply, when Jamie jumped into the road again, this time he wore his hi-vis vest. The truck driver got out of his cab and joined them on the pavement.

'I was only taking a call from the guvnor,' the truck driver said.

‘Your guvnor has landed you with six points.’

‘I thought it was three?’

‘Well, at least we’ve not caught you in a while.’ The truck driver had a neck like a tree trunk and biceps like thighs. ‘My colleague will take it from here.’

Amy checked the man’s name over the radio. Jamie stood just to the side of the man, two arms lengths away. The check came back as no trace.

‘Can I see your licence or other ID please?’ Amy said.

‘It’s at home, but my current address is not on it.’ The truck driver breathed faster, and his nostrils flared. Amy looked at Jamie.

‘We’ll take him in, Amy, if he can’t prove his identity.’

‘You’re fucking joking mate. For a mobile phone?’

‘Stop swearing, or I’ll arrest you for a public order offence.’ The man swivelled and ran to the cab. Before he reached it, Jamie tackled him to the ground. The truck driver hit the tarmac, and Jamie cuffed his hands behind his back.

‘Arrest him for the mobile phone offence Amy, unable to confirm the identity for a fixed penalty or process at the scene.’

Amy arrested the man and called for the van. Thomas was in custody when Amy arrived with the prisoner. Thomas didn’t smile as she gave him the account of the offence; he booked in the prisoner. Jamie did the

fingerprints and DNA and let Amy get on with her writing in the canteen. Jamie joined her for a sandwich, and then they both returned to the custody suite.

The fingerprint results came back, and it turned out there was a warrant for the truck driver's arrest.

'Good result, Amy. Decent body,' Thomas said. 'You should take Jamie out to celebrate.'

Jamie and Amy left the custody suite. 'I'd better do as he says,' Amy said.

SEVENTEEN

Janet strolled through the open courtyard; there was no sign of Mackey or the construction workers. She remembered dropping her son off at Quercus a few times, twenty years ago, before she gave him her old Rover Metro and he'd become self-driving.

It surprised her how little had changed since the developers had bought the college, along with the adjacent abandoned asylum, a few years ago. The upper walkways connecting the various blocks were still there, and the landscaped courtyards and gardens too.

English Heritage must have listed the building; otherwise, it was an expensive way to build new housing. With the rail links nearby and central London just a thirty-minute stop away then the price was worth it. The new apartments were out of Janet's price range, but she could see the attraction.

Janet trusted herself; age had dimmed the limbs but sharpened the mind. She walked through the college grounds over to the side bordered by woodland away from the main road. By the fence something glinting in the sunlight near the boundary. It seemed out of place.

Janet perused birds pecking at discarded chips on the ground. A hole, obscured by foliage and thorns. A piece

of material, yellow and silver, hung from the thorns; blood drops stained the fabric. Janet picked the cloth from the bush and smelt it; she knew already that the blood was fresh; it was bright red. Janet pushed through branches and the gap in the fence, easy when you're small.

The hole opened out onto a path running along a ridge, and a steep bank fell away into more woodland. A narrow stream snaked along through the undergrowth in the valley. Boot prints carved a random pattern into the dirt of the bank. Janet returned through the hole in the fence.

Janet called Amy. 'I'm at the back of the college. It looks like people have been leaving in a hurry, they're heading for the road through the woodland; send units to have a peek.' Amy handed the phone to Ed.

'What's your suggestion Janet?' Ed said.

'I'd get the fire brigade to bring their giant can opener and cut you a big hole through the fence.'

'Good enough for me.'

Janet walked back over to the main blocks. She saw a smashed window in one of the lower level buildings and looked through the shards. Scary clown masks hung on the wall; Janet remembered her son bringing something similar home. His artwork now hung on the walls of a little gallery in Brick Lane, and, to her amazement, it paid his bills.

A thick liquid smeared the art room vinyl floor. Dark red. Paint? More likely blood. Janet followed the trail to a set of double doors opening from the courtyard. She entered the building and arrived at a stairwell.

The blood trail led up the stairs. Janet had no rush of adrenaline, and felt no apprehension, as she climbed the stairs. Her heart rate dropped as she rounded the half landing and ascended the last flight.

Janet entered the science room and gawped at two figures lying on the ground. The first was dead with three holes in the chest.

The second man was smaller, wearing a white shirt and black trousers. Something had smashed his nose up, and he had a purple swelling on the side of his temple. She shook him by the shoulder and said, 'Jamie.'

No response.

Janet opened Jamie's mouth and looked inside: no obstructions. She listened for breathing; it was shallow and weak. Janet called Amy.

'We need paramedics in here now, at the first floor of the building in the central courtyard. Officer injured.'

'Is it Jamie?'

'Don't know, Amy, get them in here fast.'

Janet descended the stairs as fast as she could, which was not quick enough for her liking. She stepped into the stairwell and saw the AED cabinet on the wall. The

sticker on the box gave a number to call for the unlock code. Janet called the number, and, to her surprise, an operator answered straight away, and gave her an access number.

Janet punched in the code on the metal keys and the cabinet unlocked. She extracted the case inside and hurried back up the stairs and into the science area where she unbuttoned Jamie's shirt. The AED case contained various implements, including tough cut scissors and a razor.

'Don't think we need the razor Jamie. Has Amy got you waxing?'

She took out wipes and cleaned Jamie's chest and then took out the electrode pouches and stuck them onto him. Janet pressed the button on the machine.

'Analysing,' said the machine voice. Janet waited. 'Shock required, stand away from the patient and prepare to shock. Press the shock button now.' Janet pressed the shock button. A jolt. 'Please begin CPR.'

Janet knelt close to Jamie pushed the heels of her hands into his sternum. Hundred beats a minute to the rhythm of Staying Alive.

Two minutes later the paramedics found an exhausted Janet. Four paramedics, all women.

'We'll take it from here love, well done,' said one. Janet felt a surge of relief; she'd done her duty; over to the professionals now.

Janet gazed out of the window; an army of police swarmed around the buildings. They had helmets, and riot shields. Police dogs sniffed around in the courtyard.

Janet heard rotor blades; the air ambulance landed in the field, and a man got out. The writing on his orange overall showed that he was a doctor. One paramedic waved and shouted to him out of the first floor window. He ran over, accompanied by two other men who carried a stretcher. The men disappeared as they entered the building and then reappeared in the science room. The doctor looked into Jamie's eyes and spoke with the paramedics. They strapped Jamie to the stretcher and carried him into the helicopter. Janet watched the aircraft rise into the sky as Ed entered the room.

'Always at the heart of the action Janet.'

'Not as easy as it used to be Ed.'

'I don't remember things ever being easy with you. Well done. How is he?'

'I don't know, he didn't look good; he had a bruise on his head and might have banged it on the table. He's a brave boy, looks like this fellow underestimated him. Where's Amy?'

'Amy's outside in the car; I told her to stay out of here.'

'She did what you asked?'

'Some officers can follow orders, Janet.'

'Amy surprises me, I thought I saw a spark there this morning.'

'You don't have to be reckless to have a spark, Janet.'

'I guess you've proved that, Ed. Thought you'd have made it higher than a chief inspector by now though.'

'I'm glad to hear compliments still don't come for free. Maybe testifying for you hurt my career.' Ed listened to his radio. 'They've found Rob. They've also found a body down near the old entrance, let's take a walk.'

Ed put his arm out, and Janet linked her arm under his. The chest compressions had tired her. 'Thanks,' she said. 'The leg never recovered; I should have paid more attention to the physio.'

'You had other things on your mind.'

'I had plenty of time but always found something more interesting to do. Prison libraries are well stocked.'

'What are you reading these days?'

'You've always had the small talk Ed, but you save your energy for sorting out this mess, I'll be all right. If you get me outside, I'll rest, and then I'll get home.'

'I'm sure you'll be all right. I'm just trying to keep an eye on you to get a statement before you disappear, as I've got a feeling you won't be the easiest person to trace.'

They walked out into a courtyard, and Janet sat down at a wooden A-frame bench and table.

'Would you take this lady's statement please,' Ed said to a young officer who didn't look sure where he should be going. 'Not every day you meet a legend; get her a cup of tea please.' Ed bent down and hugged Janet around the shoulders. 'Good to see you again Ma'am.'

Ed squinted over towards the main road where Amy had crossed the crime scene cordon.

EIGHTEEN

The dog poked its head around Julia's door; the creature was two feet long and white, with brown ears and bright eyes. Its mouth was open, and it smiled at Roberts.

Roberts wasn't an expert on dogs. He'd come across them plenty of times, but he didn't know the name of the breed or whether it was a mongrel; it looked intelligent. The dog ran over to him on the sofa; Roberts held the dog's head in both hands and rubbed its ears. The dog smiled and wagged its tail; its tongue lolled.

Roberts smelt Laws before he saw him; the man shuffled along, and his stale odour arrived two seconds before he walked through the door. Laws was a similar age to Roberts, but that is where the likeness ended. Laws was about five feet eight tall and wore grey jogging bottoms that encapsulated his enormous belly. An unwashed XXXL polo shirt covered his torso, stubble shrouded his face, and his hair was shoulder-length and brown, apart from a bald patch at the back; it was an unacceptable haircut, in Roberts's opinion.

'Morning Patrick,' Julia said. Laws didn't return the greeting.

'You've got a guest,' Laws said. 'He looks a fine specimen. Nice dress Dr Matthews, I bet that feels nice

and cool in this hot weather.'

'I'm wearing a skirt. This is Roberts; I thought meet him face to face for his next briefing.'

Laws's face froze for a fraction of a second. Roberts detected surprise in the other man's eyes, then fear. Laws looked at the ceiling for five seconds before he looked back at Julia. 'Why not; face-to-face communication is easier, thanks for arranging the meeting. Would you mind feeding Toto please Dr Matthews? Mr Roberts and I can go to the meeting room.'

'Sure. I'll bring coffee.'

Laws left the room.

'You're playing a dangerous game, Julia,' Roberts said.

'My instincts tell me bringing you here will be my best chance of survival; sometimes you get lucky, and I'm getting a lucky feeling with you. You'd better go.'

Roberts walked into the meeting room that had served as last night's dining room. Roberts moved a chair downwind of the air conditioning unit and sat with his back against the window.

The sun had been rising for a few hours but was still low enough to dazzle through the window; Roberts saw its reflection on the wall, and then stood up, took a penknife from his pocket and cut the two cords either side of the top plastic strip, on the Venetian blind behind him. Roberts caught the falling blind and placed it on

the floor. It was his room now.

Laws entered the meeting room without knocking, closed the door with two careful fingers and stood behind the chair as if he distrusted furniture that had not been specified by him. He was heavier than Roberts expected and neater than he had any right to be: pale shirt, expensive watch, soft shoes that made almost no sound on the vinyl floor.

'Mr Roberts.' Laws smiled at the title rather than the man. 'I dislike improvisation, so I would prefer this conversation to remain short.'

Roberts looked at the bare window. Morning light sat on Laws' face and made his skin look waxy. 'Then start at the useful part.'

Laws lowered himself into the chair. The movement took care rather than weakness. 'Has our arrangement so far pleased you?'

'Yes.'

'Has the money gone into your account as agreed?'

'Yes.'

'Would you like that arrangement to continue?'

'Get to the point.'

Laws placed a buff file on the table but did not open it. A blue approval slip protruded from the edge: TRANSFER AUTHORITY - MATTHEWS HOLD. 'Dr Matthews is the reason you are here. She is refusing to sign the clinical

transfer pack, withholding the final Reflux protocol and pretending ethics still outrank ownership.'

'That sounds like a management problem.'

'It is. I am managing it.' Laws tapped the file once. 'She still believes consent is the centre of medicine. I believe consent is the word frightened institutions use when they do not want useful work done. I want you to kill her.'

'Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds.'

'That is absurd.'

'Take it or leave it.'

Laws watched him for longer than a nervous man would have managed. 'A gentle doctor is not worth that.'

'You are not paying for the doctor. You are paying for silence around the doctor.'

For the first time Laws' smile reached his eyes, and Roberts disliked him more for it. 'Accurate.'

'Then make the call.'

Laws opened the file, removed a single sheet and placed it face down beside the phone. He did not leave the room. He dialled, waited, and spoke in the tone of a man approving a purchase order. 'Transfer risk has become personal. Matthews must be removed from the signing chain before the investor demonstration.'

Roberts looked through the glass while Laws listened. Three builders crossed the yard below. One man carried

a black brick-shaped unit against his sling, awkwardly but without curiosity. People carried other people's secrets every day because labels told them not to ask questions.

Laws ended the call and wrote a figure on the approval slip. His handwriting was square and almost childish. 'It is authorised. I want her dead by tomorrow.'

'Why tomorrow?'

'You usually prefer less information, Mr Roberts.'

'Information changes the work.'

Laws dabbed sweat from the fold under his chin with a folded napkin. 'Tomorrow is the first of July. We present the recovery platform to investors, move from research to deployment and stop pretending this is an academic trial. Regulators will see danger, families will see hope, soldiers will see return and investors will see ownership. I do not want Dr Matthews in the room when the word Genesis is explained.'

'Genesis,' Roberts said.

'A beginning. Investors like beginnings. They dislike patients, grief, refusal and unfinished consent forms.' Laws folded the napkin into a precise square. 'People call it freedom when they cannot see the variables. I prefer fewer variables.'

Roberts worried about Laws. Worrying kept him alive. Laws was not brave, but he had money, paperwork and other people's violence. Roberts respected all three.

What made Laws dangerous was not the money. It was his belief that paperwork could turn a moral decision into an engineering problem. Roberts had killed men for less vanity than that.

'OK,' Roberts said. 'I will do it. I will get Julia to drive me out of here.'

Laws looked genuinely puzzled by the ordinary human arrangement. 'What I do not understand, Mr Roberts, is why people dislike me and tolerate men like you. You are about to get a ride from a woman you will kill and invoice me for afterwards.'

'It is because I get paid for it,' Roberts said.

Laws gazed at the approval slip as if it had answered a question. 'Perhaps that is the difference. You admit what you are.'

'It's because I get paid for it,' Roberts said. Laws gazed through the window, at a plane tracing an arc across the sky. 'Are you listening? I don't get this personal with anyone, but you asked, and I'll answer.'

'Go on.'

'A civilised society has various truths it holds sacred. These truths change. In the Stone Age, it was acceptable to kill, the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest. I read it in Dr Matthews's book last night, before I fell asleep.'

'Good job I wasn't around seventy thousand years ago.'

'You're right, a weird man like you without friends wouldn't make it to adulthood. Even the prime specimens struggled to make it; life was brutal. As we evolved, we learned to cooperate better than the other animals. Humans reached the top of the food chain, and we stopped worshipping lions, eagles and bears. We created gods to give us meaning in a world with no purpose. We observed the world, imagined things that didn't exist, and made these things reality, one tool at a time. Humans came to understand that we didn't need to understand, and we no longer needed our gods because our weapons became more powerful. We became able to kill more people.'

'What about money?'

'How do you organise people in their millions? How can you influence someone and trust them to do something you want without even meeting them? Money gave us the opportunity to cooperate with no need to build trust between individuals. So, two constant things in human history are money and killing. My goal is money, and I'm prepared to kill to get it. I step outside the current Zeitgeist. This makes most people uncomfortable, but they understand it because it's hard-wired into them. I've fought in wars where elected officials and, by proxy, the electorate have killed for money. Distance isolates most people from this uncomfortable truth, but they could form my view, given the same experiences.'

'So, what's the answer to my question? Why don't people like me?'

'You don't care about money; it's just a convenient way to get what you want. Your motivation is self-importance, and that means you've got to be more important than someone else. That's why people don't like you.'

'I thought it was because I smelled bad.'

'That too. I'll find Dr Matthews and grab a ride out of here.'

NINETEEN

Andy slept in the chair; the nurse woke him. 'Sorry but visiting hours are over now. There's nothing else you can do tonight; your son is stable.'

'The doctor said there might be news on the tests they made. Can I speak to the doctor before I go?'

'OK, if you come over to the nurse's station, I'll call Doctor Rama and see if he's available.'

Andy crouched and kissed Max on the head. 'Good night big man. See you in the morning.' Andy walked with the nurse to the desk in the corridor.

'I've bleeped the Doctor, but I'm not sure how long he'll be. You can wait here.'

The nurse wandered into another bay.

A woman sat behind the desk. A nurse? Andy didn't understand the different uniforms. He waited for ten minutes and the doctor walked into the ward.

'Hello, I've got results back, but we are still running tests. I can tell you that the substance your son drank included amphetamine. Other chemicals, but we don't know what they were. I've contacted the police, and they'll want to speak to you.'

'I've been waiting to speak to the police. They hadn't got back before my phone battery ran out this morning.'
Andy had asked Jess to bring his charger when she visited with Sam earlier, but she had forgotten. Jess left an hour ago to put Sam to bed.

'You go home and get rest. The police have had a busy day today; a man shot earlier, and an officer arrived in critical condition, they'll be in touch with you, I gave them your details.'

Andy thanked the doctor and trudged down the corridor to the exit doors. Andy's thoughts were elsewhere, and he bumped into a young woman, coming out of one bay.

'Sorry, Excuse me,' Andy said.

'No problem.' Andy continued onto a landing and waited for the lift to arrive. 'I'm sorry about your friend.' Andy turned; faint recognition stirred behind his eyes. 'We met yesterday evening, outside the pub when I was on duty, I'm Amy.'

'I remember you now. Don't worry about Steve, he'll turn up, he always does. His kidnapper will get sick of him soon.'

Amy's eyes narrowed, 'Will you sit a second; there's something you should know.' Amy sat in a blue plastic chair by a green plastic plant. Andy followed her and sat next to her.

'A man shot Steve dead earlier; we informed his wife in America. We tried to call you.'

Andy's face drained of colour, and beads of sweat sat on his brow.

'My phone's dead. Is that why you're at the hospital as part of the investigation into Steve's death?'

'I'm here for personal reasons. The kidnappers held my boyfriend captive with your friend; my boyfriend escaped, but the suspect injured him.'

A woman came out of the ward with a six-year-old child. Amy paused the conversation; no need to make everybody else's day miserable too. Two men in their early twenties emerged from the opposite door; both wore shorts and vests; one sported fabulous tattoos. Suns out; guns out. The men smelled of lager.

'Bitch,' said one man.

'Yeah, bet she doesn't get much cock, working here day and night; that's why she's so uptight.'

'At least Dan slapped her on the arse when she kicked us out; his injury's not too bad.'

The mother with the child stepped away.

'What's the matter love, you too good to share a lift with us?'

'Stuck-up bitch.'

'I'm warning you both, you're in a public place, and you need to stop swearing,' Amy said, standing two metres away from the youths. Amy held her warrant card out; the face on the photo smiled; the real face glowered.

'I think we were at school with you.'

'I think I fucked you.'

The woman with the child made her way past the cleaner and down the stairs.

'I'm warning you; I'll arrest you if you keep swearing.'

'Yeah, you said, go on then.'

'Give us a cuddle,' Tattoo man said. The man pulled Amy over to him, he forced her back against his chest and wrapped his arms around her.

'Let her go,' Andy said.

'What's it got to do with you Boss?' the other yob stood between Andy and the embrace.

Amy learned self-defence during her police induction course, but she preferred Jamie's home tutoring. The diamond, on her right ring finger gleamed, and she remembered her surprise when Jamie gave her the ring for her birthday; he'd inherited money from his Grandpa and bought it from Hatton Garden.

'Are you proposing?' Amy had said.

'No, but you mean a lot,' Jamie had answered.

Amy had hidden her disappointment and kissed him.

Amy visited the shop in Hatton Garden for ring resizing and enjoyed the experience. The man in the store offered good advice on sizing up to J; to provide room for expansion during the summer.

The extra room for expansion allowed Amy to rotate the ring, so the diamond sat on the palm side of her finger. Amy then rubbed it across Tattoo man's knuckles.

'Ah shit, she's digging her nails in Mikey, it'll take more than that though.'

Mikey grappled with Andy and blocked the way.

Tattoo man often chose poor options; today was no exception. The diamond scraped his bone, and he released his grip; the knuckles on his left hand bled from a gaping wound.

'She's trashed my hand, Mikey.'

Mikey struggled to respond as Andy pushed him up against a wall, face first.

The lift arrived, and the doors opened.

Tattoo man grasped Amy's ring hand and pulled it behind her back. He resumed his bear hug, dragged her into the lift and pressed the basement car park button. The lift doors closed, and it descended. Tattoo man licked his fat tongue across Amy's ear.

Amy had laughed when Jamie first showed her the next trick.

'I'll never use that move,' she had said.

Amy used the move anyway. She dropped and shifted right. Tattoo man clamped her arm tight, but the step gave her just enough angle. Her hand chopped back hard. He let go. She grabbed low, twisted, and he

folded.

Shorts were another poor choice for Tattoo man. Amy felt something tear: not the shorts.

Andy heard the screams as he ran down the stairs and found Amy stood outside the lift in the car park. The man slumped on the lift floor, his leg blocked the door, and blood ran down his shorts.

'I'll call the police,' Amy said. 'He'll need medical attention though.'

Rob took the call to go to the hospital. He'd booked back on for night duty a few hours ago and had intended to pop into the hospital to check on his injured colleague. Rob found Amy and Andy downstairs in the canteen.

'Your man's upstairs Rob getting stitches,' said Amy.

'Thanks, Amy, we checked on him and arrested him; he's not going anywhere,'

Rob smiled at her. It reminded Amy of her father's smile when she'd put in a match-winning tackle at soccer at school.

'Hello again,' Rob said to Andy. 'What are you doing here?'

'My son drank stuff we found in Steve's case last night. It's put him in here.'

'Very sad about your friend. CID are investigating everything that went on last night, and they'll tie it together, we'll find out what's happening. It looks like

Jamie's already sorted the man that shot your friend. How's Mr Perfect Amy, heard he would be OK?'

'He's weak, and he took a good bang to the head; he's asleep now.'

'I'll leave him to you for the moment, but you let me know when you think he'll want company.'

Doctor Rama approached them. 'We've got more of the toxicology back.' The doctor waited for Andy to look at him. 'There are two active compounds in the liquid. One drives cortical activity up. The other suppresses normal waking response. The odd part is the pattern. He reacts before the stimulus completes, as if the brain is being primed before the body gets permission. It is not a coma and it is not sleep.'

'Preparation for what?' Andy said.

'Some form of stimulation or mapping. The pattern is close to old animal work I read during my training: make the brain unusually receptive, record the response, then reverse the state.'

'Will it wear off?'

'Unknown. In the trials, the dangerous preparation was paired with a stabilising reversal protocol. Without it, the animals deteriorated after prolonged exposure.'

Taylor had underlined one phrase twice in the margin: controlled exit, not resurrection. Rob read it and felt the case become colder rather than stranger.

‘What’s it called?’

‘The preparation had no public name. The reversal stage was nicknamed Reflux inside the trial because it was meant to let consciousness flow back into normal function. It was not a cure, not an antidote in the simple sense, and not a way to preserve a person. It was a controlled exit from a dangerous receptive state. Even in the trial notes it failed often enough to be frightening: seizures, false responses, memory contamination, deterioration after repeated exposure. The pharmaceutical company collapsed and the work was buried. The only person who understood the protocol properly was the woman who argued it should never leave controlled research.’

‘Can I borrow your phone please Amy?’ said Andy.

‘Course you can, here you go.’

‘How’s the Sarge?’ Amy said to Rob.

‘It’s tough on him Amy; a death in custody is everyone’s nightmare, but it’s not negligence; it’s organised crime. That FME just disappeared.’

Andy studied the phone’s internet browser as the officers spoke. The paper published by Matthews showed a pharmaceutical company in Ireland, called Tichi, had synthesised the drugs used in the trials. Andy showed the screen to the officers.

‘Steve came back from Ireland yesterday and brought that crap with him. I’m going over there to fetch the

antidote.'

'No,' Rob said. The bluntness made Amy look up. 'I'm not saying that as a mate, I'm saying it as a police officer. We've got one man strangled in a theatre, one poisoned in a police station, a man shot at King's Cross and your mate Steve. You go wandering into that chain on your own and we may end up looking for your body as well.'

Rob handed over a mobile charging battery pack anyway, annoyed with himself for doing it. 'Keep it charged. Check your messages. If CID call, answer. If you find anything, you ring it in before you touch it. I'm not authorising anything, Andy. I'm telling you not to disappear.'

'Thanks, I appreciate it. I hope your boyfriend feels better in the morning Amy.'

'Hope your son does too.'

Andy left the hospital through the Accident and Emergency exit, rushed through the doors and bumped a man on his way out. The Passat stood in the nearest bay of the car park, next to the disabled spaces. Sat behind the wheel, Andy pictured the conversation that would take place at home.

'What did the doctor say?' Jess would say.

'He's leaving him to see if he wakes,' Andy would say.

'If not, what's he going to do?'

'He's got no options, the drug he needs is not available.'

Not good. Andy set the sat nav for Stansted Airport.

TWENTY

Jennings Sports should have a pair of trainers, Roberts thought. He stood outside the shop in a market square. Dry Molbury had a fitting name; the sun blazed overhead.

‘Hot as I can remember,’ Julia said. ‘The last time was 1976.’

‘You can’t remember that?’

‘No, I was two, but my mum tells me about it, whenever we get sunshine. This summer’s crazy though, no rain for two months.’

‘Are you sure you want to go for a run in this heat? Maybe we should lie in a darkened room?’

‘No darkened rooms today. I wish I hadn’t entered this marathon now, but my friends insisted. I’m going along for the drinks afterwards, but I want to be still talking at the end.’

Inside the store were racks of trainers on one wall.

‘I’ll take a pair of 11’s in those.’ Roberts pointed at a white pair near the floor.

‘Would you like me to analyse your gait first?’ The shop assistant said, pointing to a treadmill by the window.

'Did you bring in your old trainers?'

Roberts opened his mouth to reply, and Julia interrupted. Julia had a black sports bag over her shoulder.

'You get your gait analysed.' Julia turned to the shop assistant. 'Is it OK if I get changed in your changing room? I've just come from work.'

'Sure.' He gave Julia a key from a hook on the desk. 'If you jump up on to the track please Sir.' Roberts followed orders; habit.

The machine started, and Roberts ran at the pace of the belt. The shop man looked at Roberts's running style from the front and the rear. 'You overpronate. I'll get you a pair to try.' The assistant disappeared into the backroom leaving the treadmill running.

The man returned with a box and pushed the stop button. 'Try these on, they've got extra cushioning, and reinforcement in the midsole to give stability.' An older man behind the till was listening to the assistant's sales talk and smiled.

Roberts put on the trainers and returned to the machine; the kid hit the button again. 'Much better, they've improved your stability, I would go for those.'

'They feel good, how much?'

'£59.99.'

‘OK, I’ll take them.’ Roberts hit the stop button. ‘A pair of medium shorts, a T-shirt and socks too, I’ll let you choose.’

Julia appeared from the changing room. Roberts appreciated the tight fitting lycra she’d donned. A baseball cap held the hair from her eyes, and she beamed over a smile.

‘Ready when you are Mr Roberts.’ Roberts paid cash for the clothes, kept the receipts for expenses, got changed and then met Julia outside in the market square. Julia was filling a water bottle from the fountain. ‘There’s a natural spring about halfway along the run; we can refill then.’ Julia clipped the water bottle into a belt and handed him one.

Roberts noticed a man, ten years younger, pushing a pram across the market square, on his way to Starbucks. The man took in the full view of Julia checking her laces. Roberts checked out the man’s wife; not a patch on Julia.

‘We’ll leave the car here; we can get out into the fields over by the garage.’

‘You lead.’ Roberts followed Julia across the square and over the road. They passed by the garage and then they were on a dirt track and out in the open countryside. Open and flat; a few hedges interrupted fields of wheat at the horizon. ‘No hills? This looks a boring run.’ They were single file through a path cut through the wheat.

'How can a run with me be boring? Stop looking at my bum.'

'It brightens up my day. How long have you been training?'

'Every day for two months now.' Julia got out of breath. 'I train with a friend, but she's working at the hospital today?'

'Doctor too?'

'Nurse. Four of us are going over to New York in November. We heard it's a great atmosphere.'

'It is. The start from Staten Island, over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and into Brooklyn is spectacular.'

'You've run it?' Julia turned to look at him.

'I only ran the first bit; I was working. One man didn't make it over the bridge; I guess his rich running club buddy became jealous.'

'You joking?'

'I'm not sure. You talk a lot when running.'

'My friend said it's best to keep talking while you run; if you're out of breath, then you're running too fast for a marathon.'

They continued along the single-track for a few miles, the path alternated from bounding the fields, to cutting straight through the middle. The farmer had designated it a permitted path but could revoke his consent

according to the signposts. After running for around half an hour, they emerged into an orchard. Apple trees rested motionless in the green enclave; there was no wind today. A fence line ran along the grove with a gate opening onto the first hill Roberts had seen.

‘There’s a tap over there,’ Julia said. ‘We can refill the bottles.’ The tap protruded from the wall of a shed, connected to a hose for a low-cost irrigation system. Next to the tube were a claw hammer and nails. Timber stakes leaned against the shed wall next to a bundle of coated wire. Roberts drew up a small length of the wire, took a fragment of one stake and put them in his pocket.

Julia bent down and disconnected the hose from the tap. Roberts picked up the hammer behind her; Julia couldn’t see him.

Julia felt a hand on her ankle. ‘Hold still; you’ve got a nail stuck in your heel,’ said Roberts. The nail slid out of the shoe, clamped in the jaws of the hammer. ‘You stood on that pile of nails while you were filling your bottle. I fear your air pockets have burst; you might have to see the man at the sports shop.’

‘Good to have you watching out for me Roberts, I get through trainers like wine, this pair only had a few runs left in them. The plan is to sprint to the top of this hill, go over the top and a steady run back. You’re not even out of breath. You go first, and I’ll catch you. Drink water.’ Julia handed over her bottle.

The water was cold, straight from the ground. Roberts emptied the container, refilled it and then gave it back. 'This is the first hill I've seen around here; it looks out of place.'

Julia took another swig. 'It's a barrow, a bronze age burial mound. It looks cheery for a place filled with death; there's a stone circle on the top with a great view.'

'Last one to the stone circle buys dinner.' Roberts shot off up the hill pumping his knees. His stride ate up the climb, and he breathed in through the nose and out through the mouth. Roberts tasted acid at the back of his throat, his perception narrowed, and he experienced pain in his chest and legs, but his pace didn't slow. Julia knew how the brain works; Roberts knew how his mind worked; experience taught him that the pain doesn't kill. Roberts's heart rate pushed 170 beats a minute; prefrontal cortex in charge, endure the pain, and don't let it mess with the mission. Roberts pushed on to the stone circle; he smiled and pushed harder. A rabbit ran into a hole as he approached the summit. The sun glinted on the rocks in the circle; Roberts touched a monolith and stopped.

Ten seconds later, his heart rate was one hundred and forty, and thirty seconds later only seventy. Roberts breathed and gazed down the barrow; Julia was still far from the summit. He stood behind the monolith and watched Dry Molbury shimmer in the heat haze. To the west were a few barns, and the rest was fields, trees and

fences. An exposed spot with nobody looking. Roberts picked up a rock, different to the others. The surface shone, and the edge glinted.

Julia arrived at the stone circle. Where was Roberts? Most days, Julia ran with music playing through her earphones, connected to her phone that sat in a pouch strapped to her arm, but not today. Julia listened. No wind blew, no birds sang; the intense sun brought silence. With hands behind her ears, she walked around the circle breathing, and trying to slow her heart rate. A path ran down the barrow on the far side: it trundled back to the town. There was no sign of Roberts on the trail.

A stone slab lay on the grass, in the circle's centre, shaded by the surrounding monoliths. Sitting on the flat stone, Julia pondered its original purpose; she shivered in the thirty-degree heat, and sat, and waited.

Roberts held the rock in one hand and his pocket knife in the other. He was behind Julia, out of sight, obscured by a smaller ring of monoliths within the bigger circle, it was perfect.

It was better this way; he liked the element of surprise.

Roberts struck the rock with his knife and specks of glowing metal fell into the dry grass and sticks enclosed by the stone ring.

'Give me a hand with this will you please?' Roberts said. Julia turned towards the voice; flames licked up through a gap in the stones. 'Can you watch this please? The fire

should be OK, there's more wood there if we need it.'

'Where are you going?'

'To see if we've got lucky.' Roberts disappeared over the hill. He returned five minutes later, with a big grin, and a dead rabbit in his hand. Around the rabbit's neck was a wire loop fixed to a wooden stake. 'I saw Bugs run into a hole as I ran up the hill. It was difficult getting the spike into the hard ground, and he'd almost pulled it out by the time I got back there.'

'He's so cute; we can't eat him. I thought you were a vegetarian.'

'I sometimes lapse and I'm sure eating a rabbit's not the worst thing you've done this week, have you got any better plans for lunch?' Roberts skinned the rabbit and cooked it on a spit. They sat on the stone slab and ate in the shade, sharing Julia's water.

'Are you going to kill me?'

'I was.'

'What's stopping you.'

'My limbic system; the ape in me, ten times more powerful than my frontal cortex. But you know already; that's why you invited me last night. You let me stay in your office and use your shampoo; you bought me breakfast and wore tight lycra.'

'I knew I was dead otherwise; perhaps the running's kept me alive?'

'No, it's your eyes and everything that goes with them.
Laws will hunt us both now.'

'You need to kill him. Before tomorrow.'

'What happens tomorrow?'

'Genesis.'

TWENTY-ONE

'Flights: Stansted to Dublin tonight.' Andy talked to his car a lot; share price and weather updates punctuated the boredom of motorway driving, but he needed to download audiobooks.

'I can't help you with that but I'm always learning,' said the digital assistant through the car's speakers.

Andy pulled over, not in a layby, but on enough grass verge to get the car off the road. Horns hooted as the fast-moving traffic sped past on the dual carriageway. Andy unplugged his phone from the USB cable and bought a flight, leaving at 2205.

No passport, shit.

Andy headed for home at the next exit. Jess had reversed into the drive. He parked in front of Jess's car; the bumpers of the vehicles kissed as he hit the stop button.

Andy put the key in the door and sneaked along the corridor into his office. He knew he'd missed his flight now, but Andy wanted to be on the move, to stay at the airport, on with his mission to save Max.

'What are you sneaking around doing?'

Rumbled

'I'm going over to Ireland Jess. There's a drug over there that Max might need.'

'You're going nowhere tonight, I need you here, and you need me. Kiss Sam, have a shower and come and sit out on the patio with me.'

Andy showered, put on shorts and kissed his little son's head. Sam was quiet, lying flat on his back with his legs over the side of the bed. No worries for him; a giant plush crocodile lay next to him and provided sleep time security.

Max and Andy had jet washed the patio last weekend. The slabs glowed under the lights installed by Andy while Max had held the ladder.

Jess sat at the smaller of the two tables nearer to the house; darkness approached. She drank red wine from the good glasses: the best wedding presents.

'Sit down and stop thinking,' she said.

Andy sat and placed his passport on the table, along with his boarding pass.

'I miss him so much; I can't stop thinking about him, should we be drinking wine tonight?'

Jess poured him a glass. 'You need to rest now and sleep; thinking won't help Max tonight.'

'There is a drug he might need, it's manufactured in Ireland.'

'And you'll get it for him tomorrow.'

A toast crumb fell off the table as Andy reached for his glass; Sam's breakfast debris had proved elusive to the dustpan. It had been Alfresco dining for weeks, the four of them together, with meals lasting longer than in winter, even the occasional conversation with Max.

'Steve's dead.'

The words landed without shape at first. Andy saw Steve outside the pub with two drinks, Steve grinning at a bad idea, Steve telling Tommy to look after a plastic duck. He had been a husband and a father before he became evidence, and Andy hated that the investigation kept reducing him to a route, a bag tag and a body.

He also hated the smaller truth underneath it: Steve had died in the gap between Andy waiting for the right people and Andy deciding the right people were not coming quickly enough.

'Was it that shooting at the college earlier? I saw it on the news.'

'Yeah, I don't know what he got caught up in, but it's something to do with that chemical Max drank. The police think it's all linked to last night.'

'Are we safe?'

Andy didn't answer, but strolled over to a plant on the patio and picked the dead flower heads off one by one until he could hold no more 'I need to be busy.'

The doorbell rang. Jess returned inside the house and answered the door.

‘Sorry it’s so late,’ said the man at the door. The man held out a warrant card. ‘I’m Mike Baker CID. I’ve been trying to get hold of your husband all-day, can we come in please?’

‘Come through to the garden. Do you mind being quiet as my little boy’s asleep upstairs?’

‘No problem.’ Mike and a younger man, both in long trousers and checked blue shirts, followed Jess down the hallway, through the kitchen and into the garden.

‘Andy?’ Mike said. Mike didn’t ask before taking a seat at the patio table and his colleague sat next to him.

‘Hi, Can I get you a drink?’

‘No thanks,’ said the younger man. ‘I want to get home too and put on my shorts.’

‘I’ll have water if that’s all right please,’ said Mike. ‘It’s hard to drink enough fluid on a hot day like this.’ Mike glanced at the passport and boarding pass on the table.

‘Sure, I’ll get glasses,’ Jess said and walked into the kitchen before returning with four plastic cups and a jug of water.

‘I believe you’ve met a few of my colleagues. Rob called me and told me about your son, and about your friend too. We need to go through, what’s happened to you; let’s start from last night, Tom will write.’

Mike opened a notebook, then shut it again. ‘Before we start, you need to understand something. We do not

think this is one mad evening any more. We think several routine jobs were set up days ago and triggered when a courier job went wrong. That does not make it neat. It makes it worse, because most of it would have looked normal until the bodies appeared.'

Tom breathed deep and picked up his pen.

An hour and a half later, they finished the statement. Mike stood. 'No time to get your shorts on tonight Tom, an early start again tomorrow.'

'Are you both off duty now?'

'Yeah, it's a shame you live so far out in the sticks. I might have treated young Tom to a pint if we were in town.' Strip lights embedded in the mortar joint of the lawn's block border glowed white. 'Nice place; did you do the garden yourself?'

'I got men in to do the landscaping, but I've taken care of the planting. Do you want a coke from the fridge?'

'Yes please mate,' said Tom.

'Follow me.'

Andy opened the door to the garage, pressed a switch, and strip lights, fixed to the roof trusses, illuminated the concrete floor. Galvanised racks, loaded with old CDs, gardening tools, and fishing gear, lined the walls; four bikes hung on a stand on the end wall; two large bikes at the top and then a child's bike and a ladies bike at the bottom.

The small fridge sat on one shelf, near a power socket. 'Max got this when we drove to the tip. I was trying to get rid of stuff, but he'd always wanted a fridge in the garage, since we went to one of Steve's barbecues.' Tom inspected the concrete floor. 'What would you like?' Andy opened the fridge door which revealed several cans and bottles; lager and a few cokes.

'Would love a Stella but will stick with the coke, cheers.' Tom stepped forward, took the can from Andy and walked back out to the patio with his drink.

'Do you fish?' Mike said.

'I've taken the boys a few times; we catch nothing though.'

'You've got all the gear: landing mats, nets; what do you fish?'

'Carp, they're not the easiest fish to catch, but the lake near our holiday place is full. I bought all the kit, and we've been trying for years. The nearest we ever got was last year; Max got a bite. It was worth it for that; similar to the scene from Jaws but with a smaller float flying through the water. The Carp made it to the Lilly pads before we could land him.'

'What bait do you use?'

'We buy stuff from the local shop, not sure what.'

'Try luncheon meat, two pieces on the hook. Should give you a few more bites.' Mike paused. 'I dropped into the hospital today and spoke to the doctors, what did they

tell you?’

‘That they would watch Max overnight and he’d be awake in the morning.’

‘Sometimes we hear what we want to hear; sometimes we say what’s easiest to say. I spoke to the doctor, and he told me the chance that Max will wake up again unaided is negligible. An experimental drug has paralysed a part of his brain associated with waking. The hospital can support his breathing and treat seizures, but they can’t manufacture the reversal protocol. If Reflux exists, it has to come from whoever made or stored it.’

‘Are you trying to make me drink the weed killer?’

‘The things I’ve seen today and yesterday show me that getting hold of this drug is a huge deal for someone. If you get involved, then it’s likely you’ll get yourself killed. I’m getting a feeling you’d find that an acceptable risk.’

‘And?’

‘You lost a friend today, time to make new ones. Keep me posted on what you’re doing. You call me any time, night or day and I’ll answer. I’ll do what I can, which might be a lot, but don’t mistake me for a magic key. Cross-border warrants, pharma records and emergency liaison calls move quickly only in speeches. A sick child moves quicker. I can make the system look in the right direction. I can’t make it arrive before morning.’ Mike Baker looked at the toolbox again. ‘So we verify what we

can, and we don't pretend certainty is the same as proof.'

'Why do you care?'

'What's the most important tool in the box?' Mike tapped the yellow toolbox sitting on the floor under the shelving.

'I don't know, a pair of pliers?'

Mike tilted his head to one side. 'Not in my experience. I don't have the keys to my toolbox though. My boss keeps them on the high shelf.'

'Are you two coming out?' Jess called from the yard, the wine had relaxed her volume control.

Mike emerged. 'Tom's not the most stimulating company I know.'

'He's very chatty.' Jess's cheeks were pink from the alcohol. Tom's cheeks turned pink too.

Andy joined them and left the garage door open. 'Good luck both of you tomorrow and stay safe. I'll call you if I know anything.'

Mike and Tom finished their drinks and Jess let them out through the back gate.

Jess sat at the table. 'Let's go to bed Andy; there's no point staying up any later.'

'OK, but I'll not be sleeping until Max is awake. If the official route catches up first, I'll stand down. If it doesn't, I'll get the first flight out in the morning to

Dublin.'

Andy wrote the toxicology number on the back of an envelope and rang it once more from the kitchen, because one proper call felt like a debt he owed Jess before doing anything stupid. The switchboard took the reference, put him through to a night registrar, then lost the line during transfer. When he called back, a different voice asked him to start again. He looked at Max's name on the hospital wristband photograph and ended the call before he shouted at someone who was only reading a screen.

The guinea pigs squeaked in their cage over by the garage wall. Sam and Max had wanted a dog, and Andy promised he'd buy one, but first they had to prove their worth as animal handlers. Andy had bought the guinea pigs from a pet shop, in the school holidays, about five years ago.

The guinea pigs' continued wellbeing owed little to Max and Sam's expertise. After two days of stroking the animals, they had abandoned them; Andy had gained two more dependents. Cleaning the sawdust and poo from the hutch had become a ritual along with homework supervision.

An unusual scraping noise came from the wooden enclosure.

'I meant to tell you about that, I saw it earlier.' Jess said. 'I think they've chewed through the side wall, looks like they're trying to push it out. They might get out

overnight.'

'It's not great for them in there this time of year. Better for them than taking chances with next door's cat though.' Andy entered the garage and got a piece of plywood, left over from damaged drawer bases. He picked up a few nails, took them outside and placed them with the plywood.

He returned to the garage and opened the toolbox. On the top shelf on top of the pliers was the hammer. Andy used it to bang the nails in hard through the plywood and secured the timbers of the frame. 'That'll keep them safe for another night or two.'

TWENTY-TWO

After lunch, Roberts took a shower at Julia's flat. He set the dial to cold, his skin tingled as he stepped out, and Julia handed him a towel. Roberts took a second shower an hour later, and so did Julia.

'I need you to go back to London.' A ray of sunlight shone through the crack in the curtains and onto Julia's back. She lay naked on the bed with her head on Roberts's chest.

'Do you know my hourly rate?'

'I know how to access Laws's bank account and I've got clearance for up to £100 000 transactions.'

'I would have made £250 000 if I'd killed you.'

'Not too late.' Julia dressed.

'What do you need?'

Roberts steered the blue BMW into the fast lane. He pushed the pedal to speed past the elephant race of trucks. Roberts preferred train travel but enjoyed this drive, through the evening twilight.

Two hours later, he parked the car on the road outside the hospital, under a broken streetlight, away from the prying eyes of the car park CCTV. Roberts crossed the

street and entered the building through the Accident and Emergency doors. A man bumped him.

'Sorry,' the man said and ran over to a black Passat.

The queue grew longer at the reception; Saturday night. Police mixed with drunks and teenagers, snaking their way to the glass screen where the gatekeepers awaited. One woman shouted, 'This queue is ridiculous, we pay our taxes, and we get this.'

The phrase worked because it was dull. PKL-seven-six sounded like the sort of internal reference a nurse would repeat rather than test.

Roberts used his time in the queue; he emptied his mind and focused on breathing; he lowered his heart rate and relaxed his mind.

'Next please,' said the reception lady; her eyes acknowledged Roberts.

'Hello, I'm here to meet Dr Rama. Dr Julia Matthews sent me. She said he was expecting a PKL consult about the boy from the toxicology case. She emailed the ward account twenty minutes ago under the subject Adam/Reflux and told me to quote PKL-seven-six.' The phrase worked because it sounded internal, dull and already authorised.

The receptionist checked the internal extension list, rang the ward office and waited while someone found the message. Roberts watched the smallest change in her face: irritation becoming procedure, procedure

becoming permission. She nodded towards the corridor. 'Take a seat in the canteen please. I'll get him to come down to you. We are not issuing you a visitor badge until he confirms it.'

More waiting, this time a seat available. Roberts hadn't stretched after his run, and his calves were tight. The cut on his arm had stiffened under the sleeve, and when he reached down to pull his toes towards him, his fingers took half a second too long to close.

Tiredness tempted him to sleep, but this place was too public. Roberts had learned most of the hard lessons before the age of thirty, and a few more afterwards; he now expected the unexpected.

He observed the police uniform first, but the girl with the burly policeman sparked his memory; Roberts made the match; she was the police officer from the custody suite yesterday. He moved to a chair with his back facing them; not ideal. Roberts hoped that Rama would arrive soon. Rama did.

'Gentleman to see Dr Rama, please come over to reception,' said the voice from the speaker.

Roberts resisted the urge to stand and clamped his hands to the sides of the chair. The left hand ached where he gripped the plastic. He counted to sixty before standing up and walking straight down the aisle, with his back to the officers. At the top of the corridor he turned right and glimpsed sideways; they were chatting, and the big man hugged the girl.

'Dr Rama, I'm Roberts, you're expecting me?'

Rama had purple patches under his eyes, and his skin was grey. In one hand he held a printed email with Julia's name at the bottom, her old hospital signature block, and enough technical language to make refusal feel like the greater risk. 'Hi, thanks for coming. Julia warned me you might not have ID on you, which is not ideal. The passphrase matches the note she sent, and she might be the only hope for a kid I've got upstairs. You stay with me and you do not touch the patient without asking.'

'I understand that you destroyed the drug?'

'Yes we've done all the tests and destroyed the rest.'

Rama yawned. 'Sorry, I've been working thirteen hours.'

'The kid's lucky to have a man like you looking out for him. Can I look at him?'

'You can look with me present, and you do not touch anything without asking.' Rama swiped them through the side door with his staff pass. They walked to the ward via the stairs; the lift was out of action. 'So, do you work with Julia?'

'Yeah, she's sorry she couldn't make it; she's away this weekend with her girlfriends, I owe her a favour though, and I've been helping her with her research.'

'What does she think you'll find?'

'I don't know, she wants to help you.'

'Julia tells me you're a hot shot,' Rama said.

'She said the same about you.'

They arrived at the ward and entered the bay where Max slept. Roberts took the chart from the end of the bed and flicked through it. He then lifted Max's eyelids, pinched his skin and looked at his chest.

'Max looks to be in a similar state to the trial subjects. He'll need the Reflux to bring him out of this, and fast too. After seventy-two hours the trial animals got into trouble,' Roberts said.

'Poor boy,' said Rama. 'Can you get any of the Reflux synthesised?'

'I'll go over to Tichi in Ireland and try to get it.'

'OK, you must be quick though. We appreciate it. I'm going home, and I'll speak to his parents.'

They left the ward and returned to the foyer. Roberts shook Rama by the hand.

'Say Hi to Julia for me.' Rama disappeared through a door on his way to the locker room; Roberts paid attention.

Five minutes later, Rama emerged in a polo shirt and left the building. Roberts watched from the canteen until the door settled behind him. Earlier, when Rama had keyed the staff door, Roberts had stood close enough to catch the four worn digits by reflection in the stainless-steel hand plate. The first code failed. Roberts

kept his hand on the pad and looked irritated rather than uncertain. A porter turned a linen cage at the end of the corridor and did not slow. Roberts replayed Rama's hand in the reflection: first digit worn flat, second lower than he had thought. He pressed again. This time the lock clicked. The door to the changing room was on the right.

The room had yellow and red coloured lockers on the wall, a wooden bench around the perimeter, and showers and toilets off to the side. Roberts stood in the shower cubicle and pulled the curtain closed. End of shift, a few more turning in late.

The junior doctor entered the room after a hard day on the wards; at least tomorrow would be quieter. As the door clicked shut, the shower curtain opened, and a hand clamped a cloth over his nose and mouth. The smell was sweet, chemical and wrong. He had time to think hospital stores before his knees failed.

Roberts admired the fit of the white jacket, but the badge was the real prize: junior doctor, correct hospital, correct lanyard, enough to make tired people file him under familiar. He did not try the main ward doors again. He used the staff route Rama had shown him, carried a notes folder borrowed from the locker room and moved with the irritated purpose of a doctor who expected not to be stopped. The badge reader hesitated at the first door, holding amber for two long seconds before turning green. Roberts tutted at the plastic rectangle, as if the hospital had inconvenienced him.

The second time in two days he had impersonated a doctor.

A nurse joined him.

'Glad that's fixed, good exercise though, reached my ten thousand steps early tonight.' The nurse tapped her wrist.

'I think I've reached my record today, thirty thousand.' Roberts said and looked at his wrist which the white jacket covered.

'Are you doing the GCC challenge?'

'Not this year; I couldn't get my watch to sync.'

The lift arrived, and they got out. The nurse clicked her badge onto the sensor, and the ward door opened. She held the door half-open, then looked from Roberts's borrowed badge to his face.

'Doctor? I haven't seen you on this ward before.'

'Toxicology review,' Roberts said, opening the notes folder before she could ask for the pass again. 'Rama asked for a second look before transfer. The escalation paperwork is chasing us rather than helping us.'

A monitor alarm sounded two bays down. The nurse held his gaze for one more second, then glanced towards the noise. Roberts did not hurry. Hurrying would have made him memorable.

'Perhaps you could help me, we're transferring this patient to Birmingham under a toxicology escalation.'

The paperwork is coming through the ward office, but transport are already outside.’ Roberts pointed at Max, asleep in the corner bay, and handed over the piece of paper to the nurse.

‘No problem, I’ll get this checked out, and I’ll send you help.’

The nurse came back with a porter who said, ‘All right boss, where too?’

‘We’ve got transport arranged downstairs.’

The nurse unclipped the line from the drip and the catheter from the stand and fixed them on the side of the bed.

The porter released the wheels and shoved the bed through the ward doors, out onto the landing. They waited by the trade lift until it arrived and then descended to ground level. As they crossed the foyer, past the canteen, Roberts saw the police officers again. The female officer was saying goodbye and walking to the exit. She would arrive at the door at around the same time as him.

‘Hold on a second.’ Roberts bent down and fiddled with his shoelace. ‘Health and safety.’ Roberts tied the other lace and watched as the officer left the building.

Roberts and the porter got to the exit and pushed the bed past a row of ambulances parked up along the road leading to Accident and Emergency. Two ambulance men were vaping next to their ride.

'Spurs still good for the title Byron?' said one of the ambulance men to the porter.

Byron smiled at him. 'Keeps me dreaming.'

'You've got to have dreams mate.'

'You do to work in this shit hole.' Byron laughed. The ambulance men got back to their conversation. Five ambulances in the queue. 'Which one?'

'The one at the end.' Roberts pointed to the ambulance, near the exit. It was in darkness, and there was no one near it. They wheeled the bed towards the vehicle.

'Are you sure Boss?'

'Yeah, this ambulance is the one they said, they said the crew would be waiting.'

'Do you want me to check for you?'

'I'd appreciate it thanks, tell them to hurry if you find them. I don't want to be standing around here with him for long.'

Roberts watched Byron; the porter stopped and chatted with the two vaping men again who shook their heads and then continued talking as Byron went into the reception.

Roberts left Max by the ambulance, crossed the road and walked to the BMW, under the broken streetlight. He clicked the key and pulled the back seat open. Pillows, a duvet and a folded slide sheet were piled up on the backseat. Roberts left the back door, near the

pavement, open, and walked back across the road to Max's bedside.

No sign of Byron. Roberts lifted the bag of saline and the urine bag, lowered the bed and rolled Max onto the slide sheet. The distance was short, but the weight was real, and Roberts felt it bite through his lower back as soon as he committed.

He half-lifted, half-dragged Max across the pavement, using the sheet and the duvet to hide the awkwardness of the movement from anyone not already watching. Max's heel caught the kerb and Roberts nearly lost him. He swore, recovered, then shoved him across the back seat and fastened him in with the belt. The pillows wedged the boy upright. Roberts fixed the saline bag to the coat hook, over the door, and dropped the bag of urine into the footwell.

The drag pulled something hard in Roberts's lower back. He kept his face blank until the door shielded him, then let the pain climb once through his ribs before he forced it down. Weight, heat, bad pavement, an awkward body: none of it cared how clean the plan had looked on paper.

'Sorry kid but it's better than me pulling it out.'

Roberts closed Max in and pulled away too sharply. The strain in his back punished him at once. He approached a Zebra crossing and braked hard. The female police officer stood on the crossing in front of him, heading for the tube station across the park. She turned and glanced at him and waved.

The police officer turned again, and examined the vehicle this time, including the licence plate, and walked back to the safety of the pavement, but too late. Roberts floored the accelerator.

Amy bounced over the bonnet and landed in the gutter. Roberts saw her motionless through his rear-view mirror. He obeyed the thirty limit all the way to the motorway.

TWENTY-THREE

'Do what you've got to do Andy.' Jess kissed him.
'Whatever it takes.'

4 a.m. Sunday morning, a great time to drive; no cars on the road until Andy joined the other airport traffic. The sun rose as Andy parked.

He took his bag and walked up the ramp, under the canopy, towards the terminal.

'Please stand there and raise your hands.' The man at security ran his hands around Andy's waistband and under his arms. 'You're good to go.'

No laptop today, thought Andy, as he picked up his bag from the tray and walked out into the alley of shops on route to the gates.

He passed a girl by a makeup stand. 'Morning, have you ever tried a face peel?' she said.

'Sorry, got a flight to catch.' The girl stood by the departures board. Andy paused a second; the board showed a delay to his flight.

'Are you sure?' said the girl. 'I'll just put a little on the left cheek, and you'll see the difference.' Without asking further permission, the girl rubbed cream into Andy's cheek, stretching up to reach. She showed Andy the

results in the mirror. Andy considered facial creams for women the most brilliant marketing deception ever created. He didn't realise they were available for men. The reflection shocked him; the left-hand side of his face was smoother and younger looking.

'That's amazing,' he said.

'Only £19.99 for a month's supply. Your wife will love it.'

'I'm sure she would, but it's not for me, thanks anyway.'

Andy continued through the valley of shops and came out into the central hub, crammed with benches and restaurants.

No seats remained empty in the hub. The travellers were couples or families; few single passengers. Andy wanted space and moved to the coffee shop in the corner. It was busier there though, and so he carried on to the business lounge on the first floor.

The entry charge for the lounge was the same as for the exfoliating face cream, and the therapeutic effect less permanent, but better value in Andy's opinion. He had an hour or more to kill.

'That's fine,' the lady on the front desk said. 'Is this your first time with us?'

'First time here.'

'The buffet's over to the left and the toilets are just outside the lounge.'

Andy pressed a button on the coffee machine. Half a cup of Americano filled the white mug. He pushed the button again and took two croissants from a serving plate; expensive coffee but the space was worth it.

Andy left his bag by the chair and headed back to the entrance. He resented he had to exit the lounge to use the washroom; a poor design compared to the global carrier lounges.

‘Sorry,’ he said as he bumped a man at the washroom entrance; he needed to stop thinking about Max and concentrate on the present. The man didn’t reply, but paused and looked at him.

When Andy returned to his bag, the room was filling with delayed passengers. The man he’d bumped at the washroom sat a few tables away. Andy glanced over the top of his newspaper at him. Similar age, but a better condition, maybe the man used the exfoliating facial scrub, or perhaps it was the tan. He was better dressed than Andy; the polo shirt more expensive and the trousers a tighter fit: new ones, like he’d been shopping downstairs.

They both had a scar on their faces.

The stone had cut Andy, above the eye, when he was a kid. He remembered the blood running through his eyes, the tears and panic before transportation to hospital and stitches. The boy that threw the stone thought it great fun; the junior school was rough. Andy told Max and Sam that the scar was from a crocodile

attack. Sam still believed him.

The other man's scar was on his cheek; a better position than Andy's: like Action man. What did he tell his kids: got it in a knife fight? Andy doubted Action man had kids.

The departure board showed the flight boarding at gate 100. On work days, Andy would wait for the gate closing sign to come up and the board to go red. Not today though; a slow walk would do just fine; time for one more coffee.

He left the lounge and walked the ten minutes to the gate, using the moving walkways and escalators. No stags in gimp suits or hens with horns today.

The short queue at the gate was stationary. Andy sat and looked at the planes on the tarmac.

A 737 arrived.

'For passengers at gate 100, there will be a short delay; we're preparing your plane for departure.'

Andy should have stayed in the lounge, but he took a photo of the plane through the window, using his phone, and messaged it to Max. The habit had started when Max was five and when Andy flew often for work. He used to send them to Jess via MMS using his old clamshell phone, and Max would laugh and text back: 'Enjoy daddy.' When Max got his phone in his early teens, Andy sent the photos by email. Not just pictures of planes but hire cars, hotel rooms. The mundane was

fascinating to Max, a connection to his dad in the big world. It kept Andy connected to his family thousands of miles away. Andy stifled the tears about to run down his cheek. Later, in private, he would allow himself to cry.

Workers buzzed around the plane ushering a quick turnaround.

‘Passengers for gate 100, your flight is now ready for boarding, we apologise for the delay, while we awaited crew members.’

The first flight of the day. What did the airline do? Leave it in Dublin the night before so the flight crew could have beers and then hitch a ride back? Andy picked up his bag and moved through the line, he showed his passport and printed boarding card at the gate. He would download the mobile app next time.

Down the stairs, onto the tarmac and a walk to the rear steps; the same end where Steve had sat. Andy got to keep his bag though; not busy today like on Friday when Steve made the reverse journey.

Good friends like Steve were few: friends that made you young again and made you laugh, talking the same old shit, year after year. And now a bastard with a gun had taken that from Andy. Andy breathed deep and buried his emotions; they were not useful in his opinion. When they surfaced, in the form of anger at work they’d never done him any good. He pushed the tears back; maybe he’d cry twice, later in a hotel room, alone.

He climbed the steps and flashed the boarding pass at the flight attendant. He appreciated this check. A few jets on the tarmac; it was possible to board the wrong plane, but it would take a man more careless than him.

Andy stuffed his bag in the overhead locker and sat in the aisle seat at the back. The same chair where Steve sat on Friday. The two places near the window were empty, and Andy intended to move into them if they remained that way. He'd allowed the computer system to choose his place.

The two seats next to him did not stay empty. A man tapped him on the shoulder.

'I'm in the middle seat,' Action man said.

Andy had expected such an unfortunate event and not buckled his seatbelt. He got out to let the man into the seat.

Andy disliked Action man: the superior sartorial standards, the better haircut and swagger. These features all grated, but worst of all the man didn't say please. Andy noted a black mark, in his mental log book.

They sat. A young woman, small and slim with a stripy top came next. She tapped Andy on the shoulder. 'I've got the window.'

Andy liked her. The seating allocation system should have put her in the middle. She got out her book and disappeared into it, leaving her two reluctant companions staring forward at the safety briefing. The

stewardess focused on the two men as she looped the belt around her back and clipped it to the front. They were the only ones giving her their full attention.

Andy felt something pressing against his trousers. It was Action man's phone. Big for a phone; it must be a PDA or something. Big and annoying. Why did the man need to wear such tight trousers? Andy couldn't resist; perhaps it was a way to get rid of the tension, a way to reassure himself that he was still tough. He knew he was cheating as the environment provided security.

'Excuse me, I know it's only a short flight, but you must do something about that phone in your pocket.'

Andy sensed his throat tighten as he spoke; the emotion had to go somewhere.

'Where should I put it?'

'I could suggest a location.' Andy lowered his eyebrows and tensed his lower eyelids.

Roberts understood body language. This man was out of control over a phone in his pocket. Anonymity was welcome today; Roberts did not need to lock horns with this loser.

'No worries Pal, I'll put it in the seat compartment. I'll need you to stand up again though, so I can get it out.'

Andy unbuckled his belt and stood. He faced front while Action man put the phone in the seat pocket and then sat back down again.

'Thanks,' Andy said. He controlled his breathing and forced back the tears while shaking. A small victory, he could still take charge, always in control.

The 737 started its engines, and the flight attendant sighed in relief.

TWENTY-FOUR

'You're pastier than normal,' said Rob as he ate a Cornish pasty by the bedside. 'I won't tell Mike you're awake until later or he'll be straight over with his goon.'

'Thanks, I don't feel too bad, I'll be able to talk to him.' Jamie pressed the button at his bedside, and his head and shoulders rose. Jamie rubbed his head and found the bandage. 'What's the damage?'

'You'll be OK, a good job they caught you in time, you lost a lot of blood.' Rob dropped a few crumbs on the floor. 'Do you want the end of the pasty?'

'I'm all right thanks. I'll save myself for breakfast.'

'The man stabbed you in the side, with a scalpel. It's a good job he didn't pull it out again. It turns out you've got a rare blood group, might have known, it was in stock though.'

'I thought he'd punched me. I remember deciding one move was all I had left, then he was on the floor and I couldn't stand up properly. Any water?' Rob handed over his can of coke and Jamie sipped from the can. 'Not sure the nurse would recommend that.'

'Sugar, caffeine, hydration, what's not to like about it?' Rob took a swig. 'You'd better get your story straight

before Mike gets here, although a scalpel in the side is grounds for three bullets in the chest. Leave the bit out about thinking it was a punch.'

'Has Amy been here?'

'Amy spent most of yesterday here. She's OK, Jamie, but she was in an accident last night.'

'What happened?'

'Hit and run on a crossing. Amy left the hospital after visiting you; I'd been chatting to her in the canteen downstairs, five minutes before the car hit her.' Rob finished the pasty, screwed up the wrapper and threw it into the bin in the corner.

'Where is she?'

'Down the corridor and up a level, but you'll want to wait awhile until you can get unhooked from all that gear.' Jamie tried to rise out of bed and fell back down onto the mattress. Jamie put his hand on the bandage on his abdomen. 'Don't bother Jamie; you're not going anywhere for the moment.'

A nurse arrived. 'Could you try to take these for me please?' She gave Jamie a paper cup with a tiny amount of water in and two pills. Jamie swallowed the pills and downed the shot of water.

'Can I have more water please?'

'Not now, we don't want you throwing up all over the place; we'll keep you hydrated.'

Rob stared at the coke can in the bin.

'When can I get out of bed, my girlfriend is over on the other ward?'

'I know, we've all been talking about you both. Amy's asking the same, but she's in no state to move yet either. If you're both good, then we'll take you to her later. Not the most romantic environment but at least you'll get to visit her. Call her; Amy's got her phone with her.'

Jamie called Amy.

'Hey, you OK?'

'Better now I know that you're awake.'

'I heard you got walloped last night.'

'It was a low speed collision, I hit my head on the way down, but the CAT scan was OK. I'm in better shape than you.'

'You're always in better shape than me.'

'I'll give you privacy,' Rob said. Rob shouted down the phone, 'Amy do you want me to bring you something?'

'Are you a professional visitor today Rob,' Amy said.

'If my young colleagues could look after themselves better and didn't need wrapping in cotton wool then I could get back out and look after the public. I've dodged the Sunday morning calls well though.' Rob walked out of the bay.

Jamie held the phone to his ear. 'Did they get the man that hit you, Amy?'

'No, I got a partial registration, but he knocked me unconscious.'

'How did the driver not see you on a crossing?'

'The driver saw me, that's why he hit me. He was the man from the custody suite on Friday night. The man that was pretending to be the FME.'

'Guess we've got catching up to do. I'm sure Mike will be along soon, with Tom, to get your story.'

'The driver's a killer Jamie; he killed that street robber from outside the pub while he was in custody. Do you think he'll be back for me?'

Jamie noticed a twinge in his side. 'He's got more important people to kill.'

'I'm worried.'

Another twinge. 'Sorry, I hate talking to you on the phone.'

'Thanks.'

'I mean I want to come and visit you, but they won't let me.'

'Don't worry Jamie, she's safe, no one's having another pop at Amy.' Rob's voice came out of the phone. 'Frank and I are taking shifts as guards, we'll check on you too, but the conversation is better up here.'

‘Amy I’ll come over to you later. I’ll leave you in the capable hands of Shrek.’

‘See you later Jamie.’

A heart emoji appeared on Jamie’s phone a few seconds later.

The man in the bed opposite Jamie struggled to breathe. The oppressive heat was severe for a youngster, but the fellow opposite was pushing ninety years old at least. A woman sat at the old man’s bedside; she reminded Jamie of his mother, with her mop of brown hair and full rimmed glasses. ‘I’ll find you more water dad; I’ll fetch the nurse or get a bottle from the machine downstairs,’ the woman said.

The old man gurgled and rasped; not good.

‘Hold on mate; she’ll be back soon.’ Jamie gave a thumbs up to the man. The man returned the signal but was struggling now. The old man reached for an oxygen mask by his pillow but knocked it on to the floor. Jamie pushed himself up with his hands. The bandage around his waist was tight; it supported like a weightlifting belt. Jamie’s feet hit the floor, and he used the drip stand as a makeshift crutch. Jamie pushed down and stood upright, suffering a loss of vision, tingling behind the eyes and nausea; Rob’s fault for bringing the coke.

‘I’m coming over to you,’ Jamie said. The rasping and gurgling continued. The noise was a positive sign; it was the silence that was always a worry. The gurgling stopped. Jamie couldn’t see, but it was a short stumble

over to the old man's bedside. Jamie scrabbled around on the stool beside the bed; his hand hooked onto the mask, and he lifted it and held it on the man's face. A gurgle, a cough, the old man was still going. Vision returned as Jamie sat on the stool; he leaned against the oxygen cylinder to steady himself.

The old man came into focus, lean, with wisps of white hair. Jamie pressed the bed's elevate button, and the man rose like Dracula from the coffin. 'That should make you more comfortable.'

'Hello,' said the man's daughter, who'd returned with a jug of water. The woman poured some into a tiny clear cup and held it out to her dad. 'Are you OK?'

'Your dad was struggling to breathe and knocked his mask on the floor. I put it back on him and raised him.'

'Thank you.' The woman stroked her dad's head. 'He's one hundred years old tomorrow, and he'll make it.' The old man gave another thumbs up. His chest rose and fell in a gentle rhythm, and a smile escaped the mask.

An achievable goal, Jamie thought, one more day, the man should make it. 'And what about you, how are you?' the woman said. 'Real heroes are rare, and I'm sat here with two. I've seen the news, and your colleagues have told me all about you.'

'The one that looks like Shrek I bet?'

A muffled laugh from inside the mask. The old man took it off. 'I'm Fred.' he said. 'Well done son, we need a few

more like you.' The old man took another suck from the mask. 'I'll make it to tomorrow but not much further, this room will be the last one I see.' Another suck. 'Sharing it with you makes that better.' The man strapped the mask on for an extended blast of oxygen.

'You're embarrassing him, dad.' The woman looked at Jamie. 'But he's right, you've made his day and made mine too.'

Jamie smiled at Fred. The old man's eyes glinted in return. Fred enjoyed telling Jamie the details of the incident at the college as recounted to him earlier by Rob. By the end of the story, the oxygen mask was on the floor, and Fred was buzzing with life.

'You'll keep us safe in our bed's son; sometimes you've just got to kill the bastards. Now get yourself out of here. Visit that girl of yours, another brave one.' A good idea; Jamie and Fred shook hands.

The journey to the women's ward was faster than expected. Frank was a better crutch than the drip stand and kept Jamie upright. Rob gave up his seat at the bedside for Jamie.

'Any chance of some privacy?' Amy smiled at Rob and Frank, and they left the reunited pair alone.

Amy held out her hand, and Jamie took it, kissed it, slid the ring from the finger of her right hand and put it on her left.

'You came for me,' Jamie said.

'I did.' Tears rolled down Amy's cheek. They held hands in silence, and Jamie lent over the bed and rubbed his nose against the tears.

Amy spoke first. 'If you're delirious, then it's too late now, I'll get Rob to witness this, you're trapped now.'

Silence from Jamie.

'Can we do it soon?' Amy said. Jamie nodded and smiled. 'Are you going to speak?'

'It's better when I don't.'

Rob interrupted them. 'Sorry Amy, but Mike's here.'

'I'm sorry too Amy,' Mike said. 'I won't keep you long but I need to go over the hit and run with you. We investigated the partial registration on the BMW. Has anything else come back to you?'

'The back of the car looked weird, behind the driver. Duvets and pillows piled up and a man leaning on them.'

'How old?'

'Late teens, early twenties, asleep.'

'We've got five hundred cars that could fit that partial index. We'll visit everyone until we find the bastard.'

'And when you find him, Mike, call me in, I'll make the arrest,' Jamie said.

'You've got my word on it, Jamie.'

Mike hoped that Amy didn't notice his glance at the bandaged stump below her left knee.

TWENTY-FIVE

A perfect landing. The sooner Roberts was out on the Tarmac the better. The man beside him on the plane had been a total nut job.

After the phone incident, the man on the plane had done breathing exercises to calm himself, but his eyes had been moist and he had sniffled. A shorter haircut and new clothes would give the man self-respect. But life coach was not a role that Roberts considered suitable for his talents.

Roberts enjoyed his current job, the killing part was easy and left him, and the victim, cold. He loved the travel, the money and the security though. The army made promises it didn't keep; private security kept the wolf from the door for a few years, but he'd always wanted more. His edge? Amorality. Clients offered the big bucks for the severe problems. Easy for Roberts; moral dilemma eliminated ninety percent of the qualified competition; he'd killed another five percent, which left a small cartel at the elite level; they didn't meet for coffee or trade shows though.

Roberts had never travelled to Ireland; he'd love to stay longer, but he was against the clock. Perhaps he'd bring Julia back here in a few weeks or months and show her

the West coast; she like the outdoors.

Roberts cleared immigration; his current employers made sure of that, and he took the yellow and black shuttle bus to car hire. He chose a red four-wheel-drive SUV.

The Sunday traffic was light. Roberts made it to the Port Road tunnel in no time, over the Liffey, and turned left at the toll booth. Roberts drove with the river on his left, and looked out into the Irish Sea, and thought of Julia. He entered Ringsend and parked in the courtyard, outside the office building.

The noise from the green playing fields and tennis courts drifted over the surrounding houses. The Tichi office was a small commercial unit in the residential area: an outpost, close to the docks. Roberts sucked in the sea air through his nostrils and sniffed the ozone mixed with honeysuckle. Seagulls circled over a young couple who ate pastries on a bench.

Julia had arranged Roberts's meeting for eight a.m. Roberts could be on a plane back by midday if this went to plan. He rang the buzzer at the front office.

A man bundled down the stairs; he was thirty years old, had stubble, wore grey shorts and a black T-shirt with a seagull print. The man twisted a knob on the door inside the reception.

'Roberts?'

'Yes, you got something for me?'

'I'm Jackson. There's been a problem; you'd better come into the office.'

Roberts shoved the door shut, the catch was tight. Inside the reception area were two metal chairs and a glass table with a fruit bowl next to a water cooler. Roberts filled a paper cup with water and downed it. He repeated the manoeuvre twice, took his fourth cupful and sat at the table. 'Go on.'

'They had an issue at the plant last night; a fire; they got evacuated, and I couldn't get in to get the package.'

'You're a brave man showing up here.'

'I thought about driving to Sligo this morning but thought I should meet to tell you.'

'You made the right choice. You'll give me all your access passes, codes and keys, and sketch me a map, and you'll go home and enjoy your Sunday afternoon. Questions?'

'That's fine; there is one problem.' Roberts's expression was blank. 'The storeroom has a thumbprint scanner on it.'

Roberts took out his Swiss army knife and extended the six centimetre long blade he'd used to skin the rabbit.

Jackson looked at the front door.

Roberts stabbed the knife into an apple. 'You'd better cancel your plans for Sunday afternoon, are you OK driving?'

‘No problem.’

‘Good. Let’s go.’

Jackson pulled out of the courtyard behind the wheel of the red SUV. Back along the Liffey; they got to the toll booth.

A black Insignia pulled up on the other side and Roberts recognised the driver, the fruitcake from the plane. A coincidence? The driver was not a professional: the man wasn’t acting crazy on the plane last night and was too far behind to be tailing him.

Jackson steered over the bridge, back through the tunnel and towards the airport. He pulled onto the M50 and looped back anticlockwise around the city to the N4 and the West.

‘How long?’ Roberts said.

‘Two or Three hours.’

Roberts checked the route on his phone. He reviewed the flights. There was one from Knock at 16.45. He should be OK for that one.

‘You ever been over to the West?’ Jackson said without thinking. He liked to chat when he drove. He forgot his fear of his passenger.

‘Never been. It’s on my bucket list though.’

‘Great day for it, you’ll see all the way to New York today.’

Roberts doubted that. But he was looking forward to a view of the Atlantic.

They continued in silence. Green blankets either side replaced the scorched yellow fields of England. They passed through Mullingar, Longford, Carrick On Shannon. Jackson drove smooth and fast. The sooner this journey ended, the better for him.

They arrived in Sligo at around 10.15 a.m. The rental company would get speeding tickets. Roberts was hungry.

‘Let’s eat, do you know anywhere?’

Jackson parked on the high street in a marked bay. ‘Yes, I know a great place by the river.’ Jackson put money into the meter and came back with a ticket. They were in the centre of town amongst electrical shops, bars and tattooists. ‘Through here.’ Jackson pointed to a passage through the buildings. Roberts followed him over the cobbles, and they came out onto the riverfront where the path turned into a bridge. ‘I like this place.’ Jackson sat at a wrought-iron table with the river on his right. ‘I’ve been here a few times.’

Roberts took the seat opposite him. ‘What do you recommend?’

‘Get the chowder.’

Roberts watched the river; it was low today, but he pictured it in full flow, dropping over the weir.

An eel fell from the sky and landed on the pavement. Roberts and Jackson watched it writhe on the cobbles.

‘Would you look at that,’ Jackson said.

A seagull swooped down and picked up the stunned creature. The bird bashed the fish twice on the cobbles and flew away again. Another wriggle; the eel had stamina, but the odds were against it as the seagull sat on a lamppost, close enough to swoop down if challenged for its lunch; the bird thought it best to let the fish thrash a little more.

Bad luck for the seagull; a man picked up the eel and threw it back into the river. The eel floated for a second, kicked and swam away. Roberts checked the man out: the fruit loop from the flight.

‘Here you go, sir.’ A waitress placed the chowder bowl in front of Roberts, and one in front of Jackson too. It tasted great; chunks of cod popped out of the creamy sauce.

Jackson ground pepper on his chowder. Roberts left his untouched and watched the man from the flight, checking to see if he turned back. He didn’t; he kept on trudging to the bridge and onwards.

Was it coincidence seeing the same man three times in a day and 200 km apart? Roberts didn’t know the probability, but it felt wrong. He left the chowder on the table. ‘Back soon.’

Good news for Jackson; he didn't want to eat under the menacing gaze of his lunch buddy.

Roberts followed the man for a little while and saw him stood by some railings; the man stared at the river. The man took out his phone and looked at a message. He studied it for some time before replying.

The man hadn't flown from Dublin, and the best place to park his car was back in the high street, so Roberts returned there.

A black Insignia sat in the bay next to the red SUV; Roberts stared through the passenger window, and on the seat sat Andy Teague's hire documents.

The documents gave a home address in north London: the same post district as last night's hospital and the same surname as the hospital kid. The man by the river had the same burly frame as the kid; he could be his father. Best to get rid of this man now.

Folding blades less than six centimetres draw little attention. Roberts had the fourteen-tool Swiss army model; sixteen if you count the toothpick and tweezers. He'd changed his knife to have seventeen uses. Roberts had smeared poison onto the small blade and coated it with tape to give him a useful and discrete weapon for close quarter kills.

He hooked his fingernail into the dent in the blade, extracted it and unwrapped the tape to show a purple coloured viscous coating. He put on gloves and palmed the weapon.

Back through the alleyway on the river bank, Andy stood in the distance with his gaze fixed on the river, Jackson chewed, and the seagull stared.

Roberts walked close to the shop entrances, out of peripheral vision. A lady in a summer dress with a five-year-old girl stepped out.

'Excuse me,' Roberts said and continued. He moved a chair aside that blocked his progress. CCTV covered the shop entrances but not the kill zone. Andy looked down at his phone and scanned around the parade; Roberts ducked inside a doorway and observed through the window.

'Can I help you?' said the owner of the café.

'You can keep quiet.' Roberts stared. The owner complied.

A family of four passed by, Americans. A local teenager teased his girlfriend; his friend strolled next to them, and then the path was clear. Andy was staring at his phone again; excessive screen time can be harmful to health. Roberts marched across the street and thrust the blade at Andy's lower back.

He hit only air. Andy vaulted the railing and fell towards the river.

Suicide?

Even better, thought Roberts.

TWENTY-SIX

'Eventually, everything connects:' the phrase stood out from the others on the airport walkway screen, framed in clouds. Andy cleared immigration, booked a black Insignia from the rental area and sat. A lamp on the dashboard flashed red, and the fuel gauge showed three quarters.

Tichi owned a commercial office in Dublin, out near the docks: not the main plant, not even a proper public reception, more a compliance outpost with meeting rooms and a small archive. Andy doubted that anyone senior would be there on Sunday, but the drive was short, and he wanted to get a sense of the company. Three production facilities in Ireland and Andy would check each one if needed.

He made it to the toll booth gateway to Ringsend in twenty minutes. The Liffey reflected the light blue sky, and better than any time since Friday night. He planned the upcoming week: no meetings booked for Monday, must be in London Wednesday, World Cup final tonight. Sadness replaced the momentary excitement; he'd planned to watch the final with Max and Sam at home. Andy's friends from the club were meeting in a local pub, but he wanted to share this moment with his family. He wept as he drove.

No problem parking outside the Tichi office; the crescent-shaped courtyard had empty car park bays. A cleaning contractor's van was parked by the bins, rear doors open, radio playing inside. Andy reversed into the bay closest to the entrance door. The buzzer with intercom had only one button. He pressed it, and the burr from inside was louder than expected. The door was closed but not flush, held by the tired tongue of a magnetic lock that had not quite caught after the cleaner's last trip out.

The ground floor office spread out from a glass door in the reception area. A bank of ten desks in the middle and two meeting rooms created from toughened glass. Frosting coated the glazing in places; a useful reminder for Andy; he remembered his last holiday with Jess before marriage.

They'd roughed it through Thailand for two weeks, and he'd booked an upscale hotel for the final night. The courtesy limo had plucked them from other grimy tourists at the bus stop.

Jess had waited on the balcony and wore white shorts and a pink T-shirt, laundered by the hotel using the express service.

Andy picked two champagne glasses, fizzing with promise, from the tray on the mini bar inside the room, and carried them out towards the balcony. Bang. Andy's nose hit the glass balcony screen first, then his forehead. 'Not a drop spilt,' he said, as Jess opened the screen.

The Tichi office was a bright, fresh and airy place. Andy returned to reception and climbed the feature stair to the first floor landing; two doors opened off it. One entrance led to another open-plan space.

Andy pushed the other door and entered a small office. The screen on the desk still had a spreadsheet open; Andy wiggled the mouse and sat in the chair.

The email account had interesting reads: one from a maintenance company apologising for not making it to fix the door; one from Seamus Bradley, about a delivery and a fire at the plant; one from Steve George, confirming a meeting for Friday.

Was Steve here?

Andy's mobile rang.

'Mr Teague?'

'Yes.'

'It's Mike Baker here, CID.'

'I'm listening to you Mike.'

'Andy, someone took your son from the hospital last night; it was a man impersonating a doctor.'

'Tell me everything Mike.'

'We know he was driving a blue BMW and we've narrowed it down to about five hundred possible vehicles. He was the same man that killed a street robber in the custody suite on Friday night: the street robber that tried to steal your friend's bag.'

‘Anything else?’

‘He ran down a police officer while getting away and gave her life-changing injuries. We’ve got a sketch of him from a good description by the injured officer; the suspect deleted the CCTV tapes from the custody suite before he left.’

‘Send it Mike and let me know anything you find out.’

‘Will do.’

Andy thought he might vomit and his head throbbed.

He looked at the email signature of Seamus Bradley; the man worked at the Tichi building in Sligo. Andy checked the directions: ‘2 hours 45 minutes in light traffic.’

Back in the Insignia, Andy programmed the sat nav. The map showed a line coast to coast, the N4 motorway. His phone beeped, showing an incoming message. The message was from Max: ‘Thanks for the photo of the plane dad. Hope you enjoyed the flight, looking forward to tonight.’

Andy typed: ‘Where are you?’

No reply.

Andy looked at the phone for a minute but couldn’t figure it out, so he drove. He retraced the route back down the Liffey; it didn’t raise his spirits this time. He exited the toll booth, traversed the tunnel, looped back around the city and then hammered into the West, with the sun reflecting in his rear-view mirror.

Andy's phone rested on the passenger seat ready for more messages from Max. None came. The black Vauxhall chewed up the miles, and the West arrived by mid-morning. Another beep from the phone then prompted Andy to stop at a petrol station just out of Sligo.

The message from Max was, 'Meet me at the bridge.' Andy checked the map of Sligo and saw a few bridges in the town centre over the river. A lake upstream forced the river along its route, through the town centre, on its way to a weir near an old mill.

A car's horn blasted behind him and a woman in a white range rover glared. Andy put the Insignia in gear and cleared the water and air pump he'd blocked during his stop.

The road into town passed a sign to the local airport, an aerodrome perhaps? The traffic slowed and filtered into a high street. Pubs and houses and signs of redevelopment. A few offices were springing up inside sympathetic conversions. The high street came to a halt at a T-junction. Right or left? Andy wasn't sure.

White lines on the tarmac formed a mini car park, and a bay stood free next to a red SUV, another rental vehicle; Andy had seen a few of them back at the airport collection yard.

He'd driven SUV's and had a seven-seater before the Passat. Max picked it from the company list, reasoning that the seven seats would be better; Max could invite five

friends to his birthday party. Andy had hated the vehicle then with its imprecise steering and body roll; the clunky gear changes calloused his left hand.

He loved it now, with hindsight. On long journeys and overnight stays, traces of his family travelled with him. Crisp packets stuffed into side pockets and Sam's dinosaurs and monsters littering each of the seven seats. He was a bus driver on away matches; three dads, four kids and kit, no problem. The car made holiday packing simple; the hellish game of suitcase Tetris suspended. Max had chosen it, a taste of man fun for him.

The lease on the SUV had expired, and Andy handed back the tired monster with the upholstery containing ground-in-sweets. Something else expired though; the part of life where Max was still really a child.

The interior of Andy's car was now always clean, and the worst litter was from Andy, his driver's side pocket filled with old receipts and car park tickets. Was it that the children were growing up and learning to respect property more? In part maybe, but Andy reflected that it was the family trips were less frequent. Max's birthday parties and coke bombs from his friends had stopped. Video games had replaced woodland rambles and National Trust parks. The car was cleaner, but the golden years of childhood were fading to memory.

He stuck the pay and display sticker inside the Insignia's windshield. Two young men trundled past Andy. They wore Ireland Rugby shirts; one had his head

shaved around the sides with a short quiff on top, like Max.

'Morning lads, which way is the river please?'

'Oh, you're just through there,' the lad with the quiff said. He pointed to a narrow passage between the buildings. Andy couldn't see the end of the alley.

'Congratulations on the Six Nations win, you've got a great team,' Andy said. 'Fantastic job down in Australia too.'

'You're right enough. But it's England everyone will watch tonight.'

'I take it you'll be supporting us, like we supported Ireland back in 1990 when England didn't qualify.'

'We weren't born then, but you can count on our support.' They both stroked the badge on their shirts and laughed. 'Good luck.'

Andy smiled and crossed over to the passageway. The chat in the street with the two Irish lads lifted him and made him think about the match, which made him consider Max's message.

Was Max OK? Had someone stolen his phone and started a sick game? He rechecked his mobile phone; a picture message from Mike Baker had arrived: the artist's impression of Max's kidnapper. It was the man who had sat next to him on the plane: Action man. Was he following him? Was he the man sending the messages?

Thud.

Andy jumped a little.

An eel had fallen from the sky and just missed him. A seagull swooped at the stricken fish and flew off again. Andy's sympathies lay with the eel, because of bad experiences involving Seagulls, sandwiches and picnic benches. The worst of the incidents had resulted in minor first aid applied to Andy's forehead, by Jess.

Seagulls worked in teams, like velociraptors. Andy stared skywards, searching for the feathery hit squad. He spotted three birds: a boss and two soldiers. He also saw a drone flying high above the river; a little too close to pedestrians.

Andy picked up the eel, threw it back into the river and watched it swim away. Action man sat at a table next to the river; Andy walked straight past the table and on towards the road bridge where the river disappeared to a weir.

Another message from Max: 'Wait there Dad for five minutes.'

Andy replied: 'How do I know you're Max?'

Beep: 'Don't be weird Popster.'

Action man had left his table. Andy looked all the way down the parade, but couldn't see the man. He'd wait five minutes and then get out of here.

Four minutes later, a powerboat rib ride emerged from the river upstream and passed under the pedestrian bridge, near to the alleyway. It approached Andy's side of the bank and stopped below him.

'Are you Andy? Jump down,' the driver of the rib said.
'Max sent me.'

It was a 10-foot drop.

Beep: 'Jump Dad, Right now, you're in danger, trust me.'

Andy jumped; he kept his knees bent and landed on the balls of his feet, on the deck of the rib, just like he'd taught Sam.

Action man stared down from the railing; Andy met his gaze as the rib powered away.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Tichi had built their Sligo facility a few miles out of town, on a plateau that fell away to the Atlantic. The wind stirred the ocean, and Roberts sucked in the ozone as he strode from the SUV towards the gate. The road served only the facility, two farm tracks and a dead mobile mast behind a chain-link compound. Roberts entered Jackson's pin, and the barrier opened. Contractor codes were supposed to roll every month; this one had lasted three because nobody wanted the weekend call-out.

Seamus Bradley was in his mid-sixties, stocky, with a broad grin. The delay caused by the fire the night before was not a significant event. It was out of his control, so why worry?

Bradley thought the man with the scar, approaching him in the morning sunlight, was dangerous, but so was driving to work or fishing. Bradley already had more miles than his father had clocked; both had been slaves to alcohol and tobacco. Death held no fear for him; the extra money that Jackson offered was risk-free.

'Disappointing that I had to make this journey,' Roberts said.

'How can you call that view disappointing,' Bradley said.
'You can see New York if you look hard enough.'

'Spare me. I'm already here longer than I'd planned, I'll do my sightseeing another time.'

'You're coming again? Your line of work is risky, you might be dead tomorrow, why not enjoy today?'

'If you'd like to see retirement Grandpa, hand over the package.'

Jackson glared at Bradley and nodded at him.

'I've just arrived, I had a lie in this morning, I was on a streak at the poker last night, I'll fetch it.'

'You lead the way, we'll follow. You stink of alcohol.'

'I've noticed something about you son, that may cause you problems in your life. It may even be the reason you're at this dive on a Sunday morning, talking to a drunk.'

Bradley intrigued Roberts. 'Tell me more Grandpa.'

'I've got no grandchildren, or children. If I did, perhaps I'd not talk like this to you.'

'You've got my full attention.'

Jackson stared at his own feet.

'You don't say please. A common decency that shows you see the other person as an equal. If you were my son, I'd have kicked your arse if you talked the way you do.'

'I've never found the need to ask.' The old man irritated Roberts; how could a washed-up drunk get under his skin? 'I'll make this simple for you, lead the way to the package right now. Booze doesn't taste as good with no tongue.'

Roberts took out his penknife again, this time he selected the long blade, the rabbit skinner. Roberts had wiped the short blade clean back in Sligo, using the napkin from the chowder place.

'You do what you must, what you think will be most effective,' said Bradley and stared Roberts straight in the eyes.

Jackson withdrew from them a little and stood behind Roberts. Roberts breathed and spoke. 'Please Mr Bradley, take me to the package.'

'No problem let's get going.'

Bradley led the way into the warehouse. It reminded Roberts of the PKL building back in England, but with boxes rather than computer kit packed to the rafters. As he followed Bradley, Roberts's thoughts drifted to Julia.

Julia had been in the van when he'd handed over the kid to her at the service station, a few miles from the hospital. She had stepped out of the passenger seat of the Ford Transit and kissed him. Roberts hadn't recognised the driver who had helped them move the kid from the BMW.

In the van had been a hospital bed, drips, pipes, bags, monitors. The driver had jumped down and out of the rear of the vehicle and shut the doors.

Roberts had enjoyed being closed in with Julia; he had done well, and Julia had looked pleased.

'I'll do a few checks on him, and we'll get moving,' she had said. 'You know what you've got to do next?'

'I know, and I'll be back tomorrow.'

'Any delays let me know.'

Julia had worked on the kid for a few minutes, and a heart trace had appeared on the screen.

'We're ready to go,' she had said. Roberts had kissed her, got out of the van, and shut the back door.

An hour later, Roberts had pulled the BMW into the airport long stay and rolled into a slot. There would be one hell of a parking bill racked up by the car; Roberts wondered whether it would take weeks or months before the authorities found it.

Bradley stepped from the warehouse into a process area; red service ducts passed through the roof trusses overhead.

'We're over in the cold-room,' said Jackson and pointed to a white cube in the processing hall. 'We need to freeze dry the ingredients after mixing; they're stable for a few days at most. Goes off faster than eggs, and an egg mould is what we'll use this time. You must put on

this gear.'

Jackson and Roberts put on thick jackets, over-trousers, gloves and a balaclava. Jackson pressed his thumb onto the sensor, and the door opened; they left Bradley outside the cold-room.

'Minus 50 degrees Celsius,' Jackson said. 'We don't want to hang around in here too long.'

'That's for sure.'

'The premix is all in that pressurised hopper on the wall, it's taken a month to synthesise. You need to hit that switch, and we're good to go.'

Roberts pressed a green button on a control panel. A yellow liquid squirted out of the hopper into a mould. 'I saved the packaging box from a chocolate egg I bought for my daughter.'

'I bet she'd be proud of you. You could go into school on the careers day to show what daddy does at work.'

Jackson placed the egg mould on a conveyor and pressed another switch. The egg passed through the chiller, and he picked it up when it emerged on the other side; the yellow liquid had hardened. Jackson removed the casing using a pair of scissors and held the egg out in front of him; Roberts put his hands out to take it.

'Not yet; that's the freezing part done, but as soon as you walk out of the room, the frozen solution will melt. Now we've got to dry it.'

'So how are you going to dry it without heating it?'

'We'll reduce the pressure; the ice will evaporate to steam without ever turning to water; have you ever drunk instant coffee?'

'I only drink ground.'

'Yeah, but I'm sure you're aware of instant coffee. You add boiling water, and you're back to the original. It enables the powder to travel around the world, keeping all the original flavour; it's my favourite method of preservation.'

Jackson was in full flow, the enthusiasm clear in his sparkling eyes. Roberts wondered what made Jackson get involved in all this; was the extra money worth it? Maybe it was; Jackson had a little girl. There would be ballet classes; perhaps holiday had blown the budget.

Jackson signalled to Bradley, who watched through a thick glass portal in the wall. 'The stuff we produce in here goes through on trays, straight from the chiller via conveyor into the decompression vessel. We'll switch to manual and turn up the pressure to speed up the process.'

Bradley pulled a lever outside the chiller, and the conveyor stopped. He walked over to a cylindrical tank, clambered up a ladder, turned a wheel on a circular hatch and opened it. Bradley gave Jackson a thumbs up signal from on top of the vessel.

‘We’ve got to be quick now.’ Jackson wrapped the egg in a thick fibrous material that lay on a table. ‘We’ve only got a minute to get over to the tank. Seamus has opened the maintenance hatch and we’ll put it in the airlock at the top.’

‘Whatever you’ve got to do.’

Roberts watched through the glass portal as Jackson carried his bundle up the ladder, keeping one hand on the rail; Jackson placed the egg in a wire basket and lowered it through the hatch. Bradley returned from the drying tank and met Roberts in the cold-room, not bothering to put on the protective equipment.

‘Won’t be in here long, I’ve got used to it over the years, anyway.’ Bradley turned a dial on the control panel; a rumble from the tank, and Roberts thought he saw it shake. ‘That’ll take about 10 minutes, let’s wait outside where it’s warmer.’

‘Can you look at this please?’ Roberts said.

Jackson monitored the pressure from the secondary control panel at the top of the tank. There was an emergency override if required, but the main controls were down in the chiller room. Jackson glanced down, expecting to see Roberts and Bradley emerging.

Roberts emerged alone, took off the protective gear, and climbed up to Jackson.

‘Where’s Bradley?’

‘Bradley went to check an alarm out front and told me to come up here in case you needed any help.’

A low-pitched beep sounded, and the noise in the tank stopped along with the vibrations. Jackson opened the hatch, pulled up the wire, took the egg from the basket and offered it to Roberts.

‘Here you go, consider this a handover.’ Roberts accepted the egg from Jackson and put it in his rucksack.

‘Thanks. You pulled through Jackson, do you need a lift back?’

‘If you drop me in Sligo, I’ll see a friend; she’ll take me back to Dublin later. Let’s check Bradley’s OK out front.’

Roberts and Jackson returned outside the building; no sign of Bradley.

‘I’ll look for Seamus in the security room,’ Jackson said.

‘Don’t bother.’ Roberts took something out of his pocket wrapped in a layer of the insulating material. ‘It’s warm in the sun now, do you want an ice lolly?’ The material fell away, and Roberts handed Jackson a pink frozen tongue. ‘I warned him, turns out I didn’t need the knife; I snapped it. Be more careful when you choose your next helper.’

TWENTY-EIGHT

The wind blasted Andy's hair as the powerboat picked up speed.

The boat driver could have been an extra in a pirate movie; his bandana flapped around his ears. The river widened, and the pirate pushed the throttle. The sun rose to Andy's left; they were heading South.

'This is the Garavogue,' the pirate said. 'I'm James Higgins. I'll keep her steady until we get out into Lough Gill and then I'll open her up and show you what she can do.'

Andy's mind raced with questions, but they could wait. Time to enjoy the ride and take in the view. The channel widened again; the rib turned left past rocks, and the lake opened out in front.

'Lough Gill.' Higgins cut the throttle.

The deep blue lake glinted in the sunlight and shimmered in a breeze; woodland surrounded it. Andy recognised the trees: oaks, willows and rowans; he had learned their shapes by helping Sam with a school project. Andy would like to bring the family here when he'd found Max; it would be perfect.

‘It’s about five kilometres; won’t take long. As you’re the only passenger, I’ll give you something special. It might be difficult to talk so look out for Church Island on the left and Innisfree on the right when we get across the lake.’

‘Are you going to tell me what’s happening?’

‘Let’s get somewhere safe first. We don’t want to waste this by talking, anyway. Are you ready?’

Andy nodded and gripped the handle on the seat. Andy sat at the back, in front of Higgins. The bow surged into the air and then slapped back down onto the lake. Andy forgot the real world for the three-minute journey across the water; woodland blurred to a green haze, and the spray soaked him to the skin. Andy glimpsed Church Island and Innisfree but today was not the time to stop and stare; Andy needed to come back for that.

‘Hold tight.’ The bow of the rib plunged into the lake and they came to a standstill quicker than Andy thought possible. A jetty rose from the lake; Higgins threw a rope up and climbed out. ‘Mind your step.’

They stood on the jetty together and looked back across the lake; the sun warmed the rear of their necks.

‘We went up to 62 knots there, I’ve bought a boat down in Cork that we’re starting up soon; my cousin and me put racing props on it, and we got up to 70 knots; it drinks the diesel though. My cousin’s just come out of the army, and he’ll be running things down there. We’ve got a room booked; we can talk inside.’ Higgins pointed

over to his right.

‘A castle?’

Andy and Higgins entered through the main gate, high walls rising either side. The courtyard had a few stone buildings and a well; a manor house stood in the centre, and a few tourists milled around the grounds.

A lady in a beige blouse welcomed them and took them through a door in the outer wall facing the lake. Andy, Higgins and the lady followed a narrow passageway and entered a room through a sliding door; it was air-conditioned.

The furniture was modern, with a six-person meeting table at the centre and a large screen on one wall; video conference kit littered the table. A large picture of Lough Gill hung on one wall as if it was a window, but no windows. The lady put down a tray with coffee and biscuits. ‘There you go. I’ll be just down the corridor if you need me.’ She left the room.

‘Where are we?’

‘I’ve never been inside before, but it’s a castle built at the time of the plantations. I’ll tell you what happened. When I was cleaning the rib over in the boathouse, I took a phone call. The mystery caller asked me to go downriver and pick up a man called Andy Teague from town and tell him his life’s in danger. I told the caller I didn’t go into town and stuck to the lake; he said if I did the job, then he’d pay me 100 000 euro. He told me to check my bank account, and he’d pay the rest when I

brought you here. When I checked my account, it was 50 000 euro healthier, and I got a message with your photo; the message said: "Give him a fun ride back to the castle, it's his birthday tomorrow". I didn't think about it anymore. The rest you know.'

'Did he pay you the extra 50, 000?'

Higgins checked his phone and clicked an app, 'He's paid,' the balance showed: 99, 012 euro.

'Strange that it cleared on a Sunday?'

'Not the strangest thing about it all. Who was that man staring at you on the bridge, anyway?'

'I sat next to him on my flight over here, and he's mixed up in kidnapping my son and killing my friend.'

'I thought the 100 000 euro would get me into trouble.'

'Let's hope not, thanks for your help back there. I'd be staring at the river bed now if you'd not arrived.'

The TV on the wall turned on, and Mike Baker's face illuminated the screen on the wall.

'Morning,' Baker said. 'Wasn't expecting an update from you so fast.'

'Me neither, you didn't call us?'

'No, my phone just showed me I had video call coming in.'

'Mike, I'm not sure what is going on, but your suspect is in Sligo, Ireland, he tried to kill me about an hour ago.'

Alert the airports; the suspect sat next to me this morning in seat 32B on the first flight to Dublin out of Stansted.'

'I'll check with the airports and alert the Garda.'

Mike Baker's face disappeared from the screen replaced by an overhead shot of a red SUV, leaving the car park of an industrial building.

'That's the Tichi factory,' said Higgins. 'What is that? Satellite tracking?'

'I don't think it's a satellite; it looks more like drone footage.'

Andy and Higgins watched the SUV's journey and drank coffee. The vehicle stopped at a terrace house in town, and the passenger got out. The owner of the house, a woman, came out and kissed the passenger for over a minute, before they entered the house together.

'Any idea where he's going?' Andy said.

'The suspect is on the N4, won't know if he's heading South or East until he gets to Collooney, it should take him about 10 minutes.'

Andy took out his phone and called Baker.

'Mike, I'm sat in a castle watching drone footage of an SUV on a motorway; our suspect could be driving. Get your friends in the Garda to stop him. He'll be passing Collooney in about ten minutes.'

‘Did you see the registration?’ The footage zoomed to the car’s licence plate as if following Mike’s instruction. Andy read the plate number to Mike.

‘Ok I wasn’t expecting that much from you; the man is Justin Roberts, I’ve sent his details to Special Branch, we’ll see what we get back, stay on this line.’

The lady came back. ‘Would you like more coffee?’

‘Yes please,’ said Andy. ‘Who booked this room for us today?’

‘Not sure, but your company paid more than we take in a whole summer. Thank you. We’re just finishing this room for corporate bookings and put the adverts out last week. We must have picked a good marketing agency.’

The SUV passed over a bridge.

‘We should see here whether he goes straight on or turns South on the N17,’ Higgins said.

Roberts didn’t do either though. An unmarked Garda car overtook him at around a hundred miles an hour; two more high powered vehicles, came up behind him, and one pulled to the side.

Andy predicted what was coming next; the T-Pac, he’d watched it with Max on TV reality cop shows. The lead unmarked car slammed on the brakes and Roberts had nowhere to go but the shoulder.

Roberts exited the vehicle, through the passenger door, behind the engine block, before the officers could make

it to the driver's door. Andy and Higgins watched the scene with no audio. The first cop gripped his rifle and walked around the front of the SUV. Roberts sprang, grabbed the weapon from him and rolled backwards, throwing the man over his head, but holding on to the gun.

Roberts shot the officer with the rifle. The other cops crouched behind the engine blocks of the unmarked lead vehicle, armed only with handguns. Roberts crept around the back of the rear Garda vehicle, sprayed them with gunfire, got into the vehicle and drove away. The remaining cops were moving but injured.

Roberts arrived at a roundabout and turned right.

'The suspect is heading South on the N17 towards Knock airport,' Higgins said.

Roberts dislike his new ride; a few miles down the N17 he lit his blue lights and pulled a Ford Mondeo into the shoulder. Roberts climbed into the passenger seat of the Mondeo, and a minute later a man in a red baseball cap climbed out the driver's seat. Two kids got out the rear door and stood on the shoulder with the man in the baseball cap.

Andy called Baker.

'Mike, he's switched to a grey Mondeo, the Garda will need ambulances close to the junction N4/N17.'

'Where are you getting this from Andy?'

'I don't know Mike, but you need to get a helicopter over that Mondeo.'

'OK, let's keep this on speaker now Andy.'

Mike, I'll share our screen over Skype.

Andy, Higgins and Mike Baker watched the Mondeo cruise along in the mid-morning traffic, at sixty miles an hour; inconspicuous.

The helicopter arrived after ten minutes. A small window opened in the right hand of Andy's screen, duplicating the drone footage but with better resolution.

'We seem to have helicopter coverage too now?' Higgins said.

'They've blocked the airport Andy,' Baker said. 'Let's hope he goes that way.'

The Mondeo went towards the airport, and the Garda set the roadblock a few hundred metres from the turnoff from N17. The Mondeo hit the stinger at around fifty miles an hour, all four tyres blew, and it came to rest just before a van selling burgers in a siding.

Two Garda vans with mesh on the screen and windows hit the Mondeo front and rear. A third hit the Mondeo on the side. Officers, wearing body armour and helmets, jumped from the vans.

The woman driving the Mondeo had her hands up as the rifle butt smashed the driver's window.

TWENTY-NINE

Roberts left the children in the Garda car and kept the vehicle's rear red lights flashing; he jumped down the bank into the field. When he'd taken the kids from the Mondeo, the mum had complied with Roberts's instruction to drive the car to the airport. The children would be fine, if no sleepy truck drivers, with poor lane discipline, approached.

Sleepy truck drivers were just what Roberts needed. A business park was visible amongst the hedges about a mile in the distance; the grey and blue cladding blended into the sky.

Roberts trekked across the field; a helicopter whizzed overhead and paused above the cop car for a minute; Roberts lay in the long grass. The chopper then headed over the N17 towards the airport because the Garda had figured wrong on the switch to the Mondeo.

The helicopter buzzed from sight, and Roberts continued to the boundary fence of the business park which he climbed like a chimpanzee. A few vehicles hummed in the yard of the biggest unit: forklifts, vans and a few lorries. Roberts walked over to the cab of one lorry and jumped up on the step.

The driver wound down the window. 'Yes mate?'

'Anywhere to get food around here?'

'There's Annie's. Walk around the end of the building, turn right and its hidden behind the bins.'

'Thanks, sounds inviting.'

'The bacon's good.'

Annie weighed a hundred and fifty kilos, wore a thick black beard and a topknot; Annie scowled at a dog behind him and paid no attention to Roberts, who stood in front of him.

'Coffee and a Bacon sandwich please,' Roberts rubbed his nose, a touch of hay fever.

'Take a seat.'

Annie's clientele disappointed Roberts; the customers looked too law-abiding; they were honest men earning a crust. Roberts stood opposite a tough looking man with iron-grey hair, broad shoulders and heavy muscular build. 'Mind if I sit here?'

'Be my guest.'

'I'm Roberts.'

'Kimmel.' The man extended his hand, and they shook.

Roberts sat. Service was fast and the coffee and bacon good; a better draw than Annie's looks or manner.

'Are you looking for a ride?' Kimmel smiled at Roberts.

'Do I stand out?'

'You're fine. I'm not leaving until tonight. I'll catch the 9.30 p.m. Ferry from Dublin to Liverpool.'

Roberts remained silent for a time; the overnight ferry might work for him, it would give the cops time to tire themselves all-day.

'I'd appreciate a ride.'

'It's against company policy, but I own the company so that's not a problem. I need an extra pair of hands today, so I'll take you, but you must work for it.'

'OK.'

'You'll wish you'd booked a flight, get another bacon sandwich; you'll need it.'

Kimnel took Roberts to a truck, parked outside in the yard. Sunlight reflected from the polish on the six-axle artic. Roberts clambered up into the passenger side of the cab, and Kimnel took his place at the helm. They trundled out of the yard and made their way back to the N4, towards Dublin. After ten minutes, Kimnel hauled the beast onto the slip road. Roberts saw signs for Drumfin.

'Almost there,' Kimnel said, and took another left, up a lane that appeared too narrow. The truck made it through and came to rest before a gate. The field beyond rose half a mile to a house and barn on the horizon.

'That's my place on the hill.' Kimnel pointed. 'Can't get the truck up here in winter, but the track's hard enough

this time of year.'

Roberts saw stacks of something up on the hill. Five or six pieces were resting against each other. Were they wood stacks? Roberts couldn't be sure.

'So, have you cut turf?' Kimnel shuffled in to a shed near the gate.

Roberts shouted through the shed wall, 'No, but I've bought rolls of turf for my place back home, which beats sowing grass seed.'

'Not grass. Turf.' Kimnel emerged from the shed with a tool and handed it to Roberts. 'This is a sleán. Double-sided spade. My boys will be over to help you soon, the eldest is away to university, but he's back for the summer; the boy's an animal with the turf. We'll go into the lower field.' Roberts and Kimnel walked down stone steps. 'Watch this.'

Kimnel used the sleán to dig into the earth; he cut a slot into the ground around three feet long, another parallel to it, and then at the ends. He cut underneath, bent his knees and then heaved the sod from the ground and flipped it.

'If you cut five, then the boy's will be here soon to show you how to foot them. We'll get lunch at one. Right, I'd better see the missus, think I'll be getting a lukewarm reception today.' Kimnel ascended the steps and then scaled the hill, towards the house.

Roberts thought about taking the truck, but that would bring trouble fast. Best to play the long game and take the nighttime freight ferry with Kimnel; Roberts had to earn his ticket first though.

The earth softened at the bottom of the hill which was closer to the groundwater table than the crusty surface up at the top. Roberts dug and turned the red baseball cap backwards, with the flap over his neck for sun protection; it was a shame for the boy in the Mondeo to lose his cap. The kid's mum or dad would buy him another one though.

Roberts continued digging, and as the ground yielded, turned each piece upside down to dry in the sun. Roberts remembered digging shell scrapes during basic army training.

To get a comfortable ride from the corporals, he and his buddy had dug like moles and finished their scrape before the other recruits had scratched the surface.

'They're digging swimming pools Baz,' One corporal had said.

'Must want to be commandos,' said the other corporal.

Roberts's reward had been to help the other recruits with more digging. It paid to be a winner though; the physical punishments and mental torture were less severe for the winners.

'Sweet Jesus. Have you got a turf cutting machine here?' said a man in his early twenties who had arrived in the

lower field. Roberts leant on his spade and smiled at him. The man stood six feet five inches tall and was as wide as the river Liffe. 'I'm Eamon, Dad sent me to help, my brothers will be here soon.'

'Roberts.' The men shook hands.

'Doesn't look like you need any help to cut, you might have beaten my record here.' Eamon stared at the six pieces of turf that Roberts had laid out on the grass.

'Did Dad show you how to foot it?'

'No.'

Eamon shoved his boot to the base of one clod and hauled it upright. 'Grab that one will you.'

Roberts replicated the manoeuvre and brought the top of his slab of earth up to meet the one that Eamon was holding.

'Keep going.' Eamon smiled at the visitor and held the two pieces upright.

Roberts had learned a few things over the years: one of the most useful was to bend your knees. It helped with just about every task, gave extra power and protected against injury, by bringing the powerful thigh muscles into action.

The awkward shape of the turf made it impossible for Roberts to keep his back straight and made him bend forward at the waist to grab the top. Roberts felt the strain as he brought the earth upright and leant it into the stack held up by Eamon.

Roberts and Eamon had built a somewhat distorted tetrahedron. The sods were self-supporting so that all sides could dry in the sun. Roberts remembered the stacks from the upper field; the Kimnells must have done those before the recent heatwave had baked the ground up there.

Roberts heaved the three remaining pieces into place, breathing hard as he pushed in the final part. He laughed, which was rare. Perhaps it was sunlight, air and exercise; Roberts knew though that it was the teamwork. The Kimnells were a tough breed, the father and the son; Roberts liked them, and after working alone for years, had enjoyed the teamwork.

‘Good man,’ Eamon said. ‘We’ll push on till one, Ma’s getting lunch ready then. My slack arse brothers should be here soon too.’

Roberts and Eamon worked for the next few hours, joined by the other Kimmel brothers. The other brothers talked more than Eamon; they were younger and less stern.

‘Dad’s had us doing this every summer since we were ten years old. I tell him it’s the most hated week of the year. Dad will arrive and help an hour before we’ve finished, even though he’s missing vertebrae.’

‘What are you doing at university?’ Roberts heaved his hundredth piece of turf into the stack.

‘Engineering,’ said Eamon.

'Are you playing sport there?'

'I do rugby through the winter, but football in the summer is my sport.'

'I thought football took a break in the summer, apart from the World Cup.'

'Not soccer, Gaelic football.'

'Never heard of that.' Roberts was ready for a break.

'It's the number one sport over here; I'll still be watching the football World Cup final tonight though.'

'Would anyone like lunch?' Mrs Kimmel's voice drifted from the upper field and was as sweet as the final whistle after the most tortuous game. The group wandered up the hill sucking on water bottles they'd refilled from a Jerry can near the shed. Lunch was soup followed by ham and potatoes and beans with big slabs of apple pie and cream for dessert.

An army marches on its stomach.

'So, Mr Roberts, do you have a lady back in England.' Mrs Kimmel filled his mug with tea from a pot.

The question switched his focus back to the real task; Roberts found the switch unwelcome. Although exhausted, Roberts felt content; it was because of the hard labour with Eamon. His imminent payday seemed insignificant; Roberts would never have what the Kinnels had built for themselves.

'I have a boss back in England. You've just reminded me, I need to call her. Thanks for lunch it was delicious.'

Roberts headed out to the porch and messaged Julia: 'I'll travel back by freight ferry and arrive at Liverpool docks at 05.00 a.m.'

One minute later a reply arrived: 'OK, think you're slowing a little Mr Roberts.'

Maybe. Roberts tried to think of a suitable reply with light innuendo but failed. The turf had worn him out. Eamon slapped him on the back and grinned. 'Let's go buddy, Afternoon shift.'

THIRTY

Mike Baker spoke over the video link, 'We checked with Stansted Airport. A vehicle, matching the partial registration taken by the injured officer, parked in the long stay this morning before your flight. We're sending officers to check it out.'

'Who's the registered keeper of the car?' Andy said.

'Registered to a firm called PKL.'

'OK Mike, I'll check out that pharmaceutical plant, looks like he's long gone, but he may have left clues.'

Andy heard himself say it before he had measured the risk. Waiting had failed Steve, then Max. From now on he would still report what he found, but he would no longer confuse reporting with stopping.

The screen cut out. 'Higgins, Do you think you can take me over to the Tichi factory?'

'I'll do that for you; we'll go in the van; it's parked by the boathouse.'

Andy and Higgins returned to the castle courtyard and met the lady in beige. 'You're quicker going this way if you're on the way to that speedboat out there. Follow me,' she said. They stepped under a low arch and arrived at a door in the wall. 'The sally port; it's always

good to have a back door to a castle.'

'Doesn't look well defended,' Higgins said.

'When the masons built the castle, the water was much higher, and the entrance was only accessible by boat. Thanks for booking; you're always welcome back.'

Andy and Higgins scrambled down the rocks and back to the rib. The three props revved, and they were at forty knots in a few seconds. Higgins pushed the throttle, and they surged to sixty knots and crashed over the bow wave of another pleasure craft. The water seemed like concrete as the rib landed. Higgins cut the power, and they coasted into a pier at the other side of the lake.

After a short walk up the jetty, Higgins and Andy arrived at the boathouse. Parked outside was a caddy van, painted gold with rib ride advertising on the sides. Andy pointed at it, 'How about I rent the van from you, no point you getting any more messed up in this?'

'Looking at what happened to the Mondeo, I'd preferred it if you'd buy it. Your people seem to have the budget?'

'How much?'

'20 000 euro.'

A message flicked up on Andy's phone: 'Done.'

The system bar on Andy's phone showed that new Apps had downloaded, and the phone microphone was listening.

'If you check your bank account, there might be a new deposit.'

Andy drove to the Tichi factory; Higgins had thrown in the sat nav for free. The Garda had cordoned off the car park.

Andy called Mike Baker. 'Mike, something's happened at the Tichi factory, have you got any contacts over here?'

'Wait out front. I'll get back to you.'

Ten minutes later, a man dressed in white overalls, about fifty years old, came out of the building and over to Andy. 'Are you Mike Baker's boy?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Pat Greene. I can't let you into the building, but your man's over there.' Greene pointed over to a police van in the corner with a man sat in the cage. 'Jackson's got a girlfriend in Sligo who works at the plant; his wife and kids live in Dublin. Jackson arrived at the girlfriend's house this morning and asked for a lift to the factory. He's a real catch this man, knows how to make a woman feel special on a Sunday morning. The girlfriend came with him and called us when she got here.' Andy listened. 'There's a man in the freezer, rigid, not messy; a strong man could have got him into the waste bins by himself. Looks like the girlfriend followed Jackson in, saw the body and made the right call.'

'Can I speak to him?'

'Don't see why not.' Greene padded to the van in his blue overshoes, and Andy followed. 'My friend here wants a quick word with you, Mr Jackson.'

Andy stared at Jackson until their eyes met.

'Tell me about this man.' Andy held out his phone with the image of Roberts on the screen.

Jackson said nothing.

Andy didn't blink, his eyes bored through Jackson's skull. Andy spoke with a quiet, even voice, and slowed his words. 'Roberts kidnapped my son, maimed a police officer in England, killed Garda on the motorway, are you sure you don't want to talk?'

Greene spoke. 'We'll have you in the station soon Mr Jackson, and we'll get you legal representation, a coffee, and record our conversation. For the moment, this man has shown me a photograph and you've shown me fear. If there's an immediate danger to a child, now would be the time to say so.'

'No, I'm OK thanks.'

Greene and another officer hauled Jackson up and held him under his armpits. They moved him behind the wall and kept him cuffed, close enough to hear raised voices but far enough for Jackson to feel the choice had narrowed. 'You've got five minutes,' Greene said to Andy, not as permission but as warning.

The Garda stayed near the corner. Andy was alone enough for Jackson to believe it, not alone enough for

anyone to pretend later that nobody had seen.

Andy took only one minute. He crouched in front of Jackson and held up the photograph of Roberts again.

‘He has my son,’ Andy said. His voice stayed low because shouting would make him sound less certain. ‘If you help me now, the Garda can record it properly afterwards. If you wait for the solicitor, Max may not have an afterwards.’

Silence.

Jackson looked at the blood drying on his own sleeve, then at Andy’s face, and understood that silence would not save him.

Jackson spoke.

‘They’ll kill me, and they’ll kill you.’

‘Who?’

‘Roberts works for PKL in the UK. They sent him to collect the reversal agent.’

‘What are PKL? Another pharmaceutical company?’

‘No. A private data company with a medical project hidden inside it.’

‘Keep talking; I want to know everything, from the beginning: how they contacted you, who you met, everything you saw there. Don’t hold back; I won’t interrupt. Another couple of tugs on that ear, and you’ll lose it.’ Andy pressed record on his phone.

Jackson breathed and relaxed a little; he was glad to share with someone. 'We built an extension to this place three years ago. The main contractor was Ranto, Bill Rand's company. During the job Rand said another client needed specialist chemicals made quietly. Me and our head of research and development flew to the UK and met them in a large industrial unit. The client was PKL. Laws was in charge. Dr Julia Matthews supplied the science.'

Greene popped his head around the corner and was about to join them. Jackson stopped talking. Greene disappeared back around the edge of the wall.

With no saviour in sight, Jackson continued. 'They gave us complete formulae and handling notes. I refused at first. Murray escorted us out and made sure we understood the refusal had consequences. A week later Rand threatened to stop our extension, which would have shut us down. So we made the chemicals. Rand collected them and delivered them to PKL. The last batch went wrong because Bradley, drunk and angry, hid some of the preparation in the journalist's bag. He wanted the journalist to expose Rand. Roberts came today to collect the reversal agent and tidy up the mess.'

A drop of blood fell from Jackson's lacerated ear onto his shoulder as he finished the story. 'I drove him up here, and we synthesised the new batch. I used moulds because Rand wanted disguised carriers: toys, sports balls, things customs staff would not treat like laboratory samples. The purple dye is a leak marker. If

the carrier breaches, you see it straight away. Roberts must have killed Bradley while I was up on the pressure vessel. Roberts dropped me off in town and drove towards the airport.'

Andy stopped recording. 'I've got a few more questions for you.' Jackson was sweating and had gone a little pale. 'Did you ever form the preparation into a toy duck shape?'

'Yes. I used a mould my little girl got for Christmas to make bath bombs. Rand liked shapes like that; harder to detect than a pouch or vial, and the carrier dissolved if it met water.'

'What does the preparation do to a person?'

'I don't know properly, because I've not seen it tested. It's not a normal stimulant and sedative. It makes the brain receptive and active while the body looks asleep. It was designed to work alongside electrical stimulation and neural recording, and only inside a timed protocol. Too long in that state and the brain starts answering everything: pain, light, memory, fear. The notes called that useful. I called it damage.'

'Does it wear off? Is there an antidote?'

'Not this version. Earlier batches tapered down on their own, badly. PKL changed the sleep component to keep subjects receptive for longer. The reversal protocol is Reflux, but it is not a magic reset. It has to be dosed against exposure time, body weight and the sedative component. Too much and the bridge collapses. Too

little and the body stays trapped while ADAM keeps guessing answers.'

Jackson looked at the floor as he spoke, as if the concrete might still hold the animals that had not come back properly. 'The notes make it sound clean. It was never clean.'

'How do I find him?'

'Rand's in the UK Monday to Friday; his office is in Essex somewhere. Rand spends his weekends in Cork, at an apartment in the city.'

'Do you have Rand's phone number?' Greene said.

'It's in my call log.'

Andy and Greene left the young officers to get Jackson back in the van and apply first aid to his ear. Andy sent the recording to Baker.

He checked the file size, watched the upload complete, and then played back the first ten seconds to make sure Jackson's voice was audible. The recording was ugly, frightened and incomplete. It was still more than rumour.

'Can I get a copy of that?' said Greene.

'Sure. Send me Rand's number, would you?'

THIRTY-ONE

Jamie sat in his hospital bed. The bay opposite was now empty; a nurse removed the oxygen cylinder. The wound in Jamie's side hurt, but the headache had subsided.

Mike Baker sat in the visitor's chair.

'We've had a match on the car Jamie. It's parked over at Stansted. We've sent a forensic team there.'

Jamie had left Amy to sleep; he'd tucked the sheet under her chin and kissed her on the head; she'd smiled.

'I want to look at the car Mike.' Jamie sipped water from the glass at the side of his bed.

'No need. The car's registered to a company called PKL, up in Lincolnshire. We've nothing official on them, but we could inquire about the BMW.'

'What makes you think they work Sundays?'

Mike played the recordings of Jackson from his phone.

'The man sounds in bad shape,' said Jamie. 'Where did you get that recording?'

'We've got a very motivated man helping us; you met him at the pub on Friday night.'

'The kid's Dad?'

On the incident printout the same evening still sat in separate boxes: robbery, officer injured, custody collapse, sudden death, missing unit, abduction. Six queues, six handlers, six partial truths.

Mike turned the phone face down and used a hospital menu as a whiteboard. In one column he wrote BAG, PHOTO, TAG. In the next he wrote FME, JAKE, ROBERTS. Under that came BOB, ADAM, TESLA. Jamie watched him draw lines between them, then cross half the lines out.

‘We are short of proof and long on pattern,’ Mike said. ‘Steve George’s bag was targeted. Jake tried to warn Amy before he died. The false doctor knew the custody pressure points. Bob Simpkin had software that turned a courier route into a trap. The thing we do not know is whether Steve was carrying something, or whether Steve was the mistake.’

Mike tapped the crossed-out lines with the pen. ‘Stop treating these as scenes,’ he said. ‘They’re movements. People, bags, bodies, route data. Someone is shifting pieces before we know what game we’re in.’

Jamie pointed at ADAM with the edge of his plastic water cup. ‘And this is not just a box in a car.’

‘No,’ Mike said. ‘But until we know what it predicts, we treat it like evidence, not magic.’

Mike wrote four plainer words underneath the mess: paper, prediction, return, ownership. ‘Names are how they sell it,’ he said. ‘Functions are how we prove it.’

Jamie liked the sentence because it did not pretend they understood more than they did. It also made resting impossible.

'We wouldn't have got that through questioning at the station. Get your clothes on Jamie; Frank can stay here; you're with me.'

'I'll need help with the shirt.'

'Never heard you ask for help.'

Jamie dressed and walked, unaided, up to the women's ward. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, and he'd put on a jacket too. It was too warm for a jacket, but he needed the pockets to hide a pair of handcuffs.

Amy was awake, smiling and flicking through her phone. Amy showed it to Jamie. Hundreds of messages from her friends, with images of rings, and cakes and bells.

'My mum has already booked the venue.'

'Have you told her?' Jamie looked down at Amy's stump.

'Not yet, I want to get them into full swing organising mode before I break the bad news.'

'I'm going with Mike to look into something. It's nothing dangerous; a check on a company.'

'Can't you rest and get yourself better?'

'This is the best way for me to get better.'

The couple hugged and kissed. 'Call me later,' Amy said. 'Don't make me have to rescue you again.'

Mike sat behind the wheel in the police car, and called an old colleague in Lincolnshire, out of courtesy, before departure. There was no traffic on the A1, and they reached Peterborough in around an hour.

Then they stopped as the motorway was closed. With blue lights and two tones, they drove up the shoulder and found units already on scene, dealing with a crash about five miles down the road. A truck had jackknifed and blocked two of the carriageways. The accident didn't look a bad one; everyone was standing up, and vehicles filtered through the remaining roadway.

As they continued, the landscaped flattened, and the temperature dropped a few degrees. Two hours later they cruised down the track towards the gate of the PKL building. Mike got out and pressed the buzzer on the gate.

A few cars were parked outside the front, near the reception area of the building. Over a row of trees, Mike saw a small stadium surrounded by a high green fence. A noticeboard showed Ranto had rebuilt the sports venue, a concession to get planning permission for the PKL building. Mike pressed the buzzer again. 'This is the police, open the gate.' The gate opened a few seconds later.

Mike parked next to a grey Corsa, and a blonde-haired woman with a huge smile greeted them at reception. 'Are you here about the car, thanks so much for coming fast, I'm Julia Matthews.' Jamie glimpsed her feet. Blue overshoes covered her trainers. 'I know, not the most

fashionable, but I was working in the clean room; I got the suit off and rushed up here to open the gate.'

'Anywhere we can talk?' Mike said.

'Will here do?' Julia pointed over to a pair of sofas in the reception area. 'Do you want a drink, we have a machine there.'

'Do you mind if I use your bathroom first please,' Jamie said.

'The gents are on the right through that door.' Julia took the pass from around her neck and tapped it onto a sensor next to the door.

Mike got a coffee from the machine. 'Thanks for seeing us on a Sunday; you must be up against it to be in over the weekend?'

'Yes, we're on a deadline, I've not worked a Sunday in a few years, but it's all hands to the pump at the moment.'

'What do you do here?'

The floor of the corridor was wet; a mop and bucket leant against the wall, with no yellow sign to alert Jamie to the hazard. Jamie paused outside the gent's toilet but entered the Ladies toilets instead. Two cubicles inside, and Jamie opened both doors. The first was empty. Something caught his eye in the second cubicle; a bin in the corner, and a small piece of protruding blue polythene jammed the lid. Jamie opened the container and pulled out the polythene; it was a jacket and trousers that matched the blue overshoes.

Jamie scrutinised the protective clothing; the jacket was wet, and a few drops of water fell as he shook it. Jamie took out his key fob and located the small torch Amy had given him. A forensics officer had gifted the torch to Amy, but she had thought it too geeky and passed it on. Jamie shone the flashlight over the jacket and a pattern reflected in the blue light. The recent rinse had not removed all traces.

Jamie stuffed the jacket and trousers into the bin, left the bathroom, and shone the torch on the corridor floor, which showed a few blobs of reflected colour. He followed the blobs to the lift and pressed the call button. When he exited the lift at level 2, he no longer needed the torch to follow the trail; there were visible red stains on the carpet. A dog barked; it had to be coming from a room on the right.

Jamie recoiled as he opened the door.

He had visited bad scenes before, fresh ones. The most blood he'd ever seen was from a suicide he'd attended as a probationer. A man had stabbed a screwdriver into his neck, all by himself. The man had gone through the carotid artery, and his heart had done the rest, pumping him dry and redecorating all four walls plus the ceiling.

The scene in the PKL office was not as bad, and not a suicide. A fat man sat in a chair at the desk, with a hole in his temple and the dog nuzzling up to his leg. Brain tissue splattered the wall, but the stench was a mixture of dog faeces, dead skin and body odour. There was blood spatter in front of the desk.

Jamie returned to reception; Julia was laughing with Mike, and she touched Mike's knee as she spoke.

'Is there anyone else around today?' Jamie said.

'No I'm by myself.'

'I'm arresting you for murder, my grounds are that there is a dead body upstairs and you're the only person here. There is blood spattered protective clothing in the ladies's toilets and you're wearing protective overshoes.' Jamie pulled Julia up from the sofa and cuffed her hands behind her back. 'I'll search you, as we've no female officer present.'

Jamie ran his hands from the neckline, around the shoulders, under the armpits and down to the waist. He found the gun tucked into the waistband of Julia's jeans.

Jamie handed the gun to Mike.

'I'll call the local police and ask them to come down here,' Mike said. Mike took out his phone but got no signal.

'Abysmal reception around here,' Julia said. 'There's a landline on the desk at reception if you need it.'

Mike walked over to the reception desk and picked up the phone. No dial tone. 'What number do you dial for an outside line?'

'I can't remember, I don't make calls much, instant messages these days. There is WIFI.'

'I don't suppose you know the code do you?'

'Do you know what, I don't, but I could call the IT man?'

'Let's get her out of here Jamie; we'll get her down to the local station and then come back.'

Jamie took a firm grip of Julia's arm and pushed her towards the exit.

'Could I use the bathroom before we go?'

'No.'

Julia fell to the floor and sat there.

'I won't make it easy for you.'

'Can you pick her up Jamie?'

Jamie bent his knees and tried to haul Julia to her feet. Julia was light, but the wound in Jamie's side opened a little, and he got a stinging sensation in his neck. 'I'm sorry Mike, but I can't lift her.'

'No problem son, here you take the gun. I'll do real work for once.' Mike grabbed Julia under her armpits and heaved her upright. She thrashed and wriggled and exhausted Mike.

The pain in Mike's lower back niggled like a sleep-deprived toddler. Mike dragged her through the doors, and at the base of the steps let her go, as she head-butted his nose with the back of her head. Blood spurted over his shirt; Mike took a deep breath and forced Julia over to the car.

Jamie opened the door.

'Mind your head.' Jamie lifted Julia's feet, and he and Mike both shoved her into the rear of the car.

'You'd better drive Jamie; I'll sit in the back with her.' Mike sighed, sweat dripped from him; he wiped his nose, got into the rear passenger door and wrapped Julia in a bear hug, as she thrashed around again.

Jamie pushed the accelerator as a van smashed through the gate, and into the front of the police car. Jamie's head hit the steering wheel. Powerful arms ripped Jamie from the driver's seat and pinned him to the ground.

'Cleanup crew,' said Mackey, looking over at Julia. 'Sorry, we're late.'

THIRTY-TWO

The sun dipped in the West. Kimmel joined his boys and Roberts in the field. Kimmel bent his knees, footed the last piece of turf, and placed it in the stack.

'Well done lads, a good day's work. Same again tomorrow; but no hired hands.'

'Roberts is an animal dad, just like Eamon,' said the smallest of the sons.

'I think we can say you've earned your ticket. I need to update the Ferry booking, can you come with me up to the house?' Kimmel slapped Roberts on the back.

Roberts doffed his cap to the brothers. His back ached, and his thighs burned, but a tinge of guilt leaving them; he wanted to stay and finish the job. Eamon came over and gave him a big hug. 'Take care Mr Roberts; you drop by anytime.'

Roberts returned the squeeze and imagined them going for a beer together and cursing the turf.

'Good to meet you Eamon. You keep those little brothers out of trouble.' Roberts fetched his rucksack from the cab and followed Kimmel up the grassy bank to the house.

A terraced garden sat in front of the house, with a dazzling display of hydrangea and agapanthus in a circular stone planter. Kimmel watched Roberts admiring it. 'We always get the rain, but we got the sun this year too.'

The house was of stone construction, and smoke rose from the chimney.

'So that's what you use the turf for?' Roberts pointed to the smoke.

'We still cook on it and use it for heating. We've got gas and electricity, but there's no point in putting solar panels on your roof when you've got your fuel in the land.'

They walked through into the kitchen, a laptop sat on the table next to a notepad and a biro. 'I need your full name and your passport number please,' Kimmel said.

'Roberts James McKinley.'

Kimmel eyed Roberts and typed into the laptop. Kimmel picked reading glasses from the table and typed again. 'Unusual first name.'

'You're not the first to say that, not sure what my mum and dad were thinking.'

Kimmel spent a few more minutes typing. 'I got a good deal there, a day's labour for 20 euro surcharge, but I'll not run into any trouble at the port will I?'

'I'll guarantee you won't.'

The front door opened without a knock. A man stood on the tiles just inside the doorway to the kitchen. The man was the villain Roberts had searched for in Annie's transport café. 'Kimmel I warned you not to be late with a payment again.'

Plucked straight from a Western, the man's mouth froze in a smile with no kindness, his black and grey shoulder-length hair dangled unwashed; he was unshaven and stank like a food waste bin the day before collection. The man spoke with an English accent, from somewhere in the South. Roberts had met such types before, and could tell that Smiler had done prison time, perhaps a decent stretch for an indecent crime.

Kimmel said, 'You've received your payment in full; the truck is mine now. Be on your way, and there will be no trouble.'

'Who says I don't want trouble, you thieving bastard.'

'We agreed a price; I paid it.'

'The truck's going nowhere until you give me my money, come and look.'

Kimmel and Roberts looked through the window and saw a skip full of rubble lowered behind the truck. Another skip lorry pulled up in front. About ten men were milling around by the skips.

'You came heavy-handed,' Roberts said.

'You're damn right.'

'The truck will leave in the next half an hour,' Roberts said. 'How much are you owed? I'll pay it.'

'Kimmel will pay it, a matter of principle.'

'This isn't about the money. I misjudged this one, I shouldn't have bought from you. You'll never leave me alone, will you?'

The smiling man pissed on the kitchen floor and laughed. 'That's better,' he said. A smell of alcohol on him, but stale alcohol, he'd kept himself sober for a day. At the bottom of the field, three men were pushing Eamon into a portable toilet. They padlocked it shut and tipped it, so it rested on the wall between the top and the bottom field. The younger brothers threw a few punches but were down on the ground; laid flat by burly men in their thirties and forties; outnumbered and overpowered.

'Your ox of a boy beat my men last time I was here. We'll give him the treatment this time.'

Roberts walked towards the door. 'Your timing is not great.'

'You can watch from the window.' Smiler moved to block Roberts's path.

Roberts said nothing. His fist flicked towards Smiler's chin, drawing the man back just enough. Then Roberts's fingers snapped into Smiler's throat. Smiler frowned, clutched at his neck and dropped without a sound.

'It's your lucky day. I'm feeling generous and don't want to leave these good people with a body on the floor.'

Roberts took the biro from the table and stabbed it into Smiler's throat below the crushed larynx, then pulled it out again, and pushed the ballpoint and ink tube out. He stuck the outer casing of the biro into the pre-punched hole. A gurgling sound and rasping as the air flowed for Smiler. The man's blue tinge disappeared, but he never regained his smile.

'You'd better call an ambulance or two,' Roberts said to Kimmel, and then walked out of the door, leaving Smiler soaked in his urine, slumped against a wall.

Smiler's men all looked hard work; fighting was their hobby. Roberts had the high ground though. 'Who's first?'

Three of the men were struggling to get the toilet over the edge of the ledge; they'd misjudged; Eamon was heavy. Three of the other goons kept an eye on the younger Kimmel brothers.

The first man stepped forward and rushed up the hill towards Roberts. Roberts raised his right knee and struck with his heel, smashing the man in the sternum.

As predicted the next bunch came three at a time like the front row of an overpowered rugby scrum; Roberts saw six shoulders, bad news. Roberts would have to move this time and pushed off his right foot and sideways across the hill.

The attackers ran up the steep bank, and it slowed them. By the time they reached Roberts, he had them in a line and he could now see just the two shoulders of the lead man.

Roberts moved forward without bobbing, because wasted movement now cost him breath. The motion ended up in his left fist, which despatched the leader. Pain flashed across his ribs when he turned too hard. The remaining two opponents fanned out. Two more joined them from the bottom of the hill; they'd had to let the youngest Kimmel go.

'Find bolt cutters.' Roberts shouted at the young Kimmel. The kid scrabbled around in the plant hire lorry that had brought the skips and toilet.

The men working on the toilet had made progress. They'd got it halfway out over the ledge. Eamon's engineering degree was paying for itself; Eamon crouched near the end of the bank to stop it overturning and falling down the hill.

Roberts didn't think about the fight as a contest; he looked for the pattern that let him spend least. Four shoulders. Too many if he let them spread. He dived left and right to keep them one behind the other, like a conga, or a love train. One man got loose from the pack and stumbled in a rabbit hole. Roberts's boot caught the man in the head on his way down to the grass, where the man stayed. Roberts' breath had started to rasp.

The young Kimmel had found cutters and was on top of the Portaloo. Smiler's men punched the kid as he worked on freeing Eamon. Young Kimmel took a big hit but bust the lock, and the door exploded upwards as Eamon exploded outwards. The toilet crashed into the field at the base of the wall.

Roberts let a man throw a punch then blocked it and broke the man's arm.

'Shall we leave it there for today?' Roberts said.

The two remaining men on the hill looked at each other and down at Eamon, who had damaged their mates. They walked back down watching Roberts and walked around the truck as far away from Eamon as they could.

Sirens wailed.

Kimmel had come down the bank and handed Roberts's backpack to him.

'Thank you,' he said. 'You'd better get out of here now. Don't come back though, please. Take the van over there. I don't think its owner will need it soon.' Kimmel gave Roberts the keys to a white Citroen Berlingo sat by the fence.

Roberts drove away.

THIRTY-THREE

Four p.m. Sunday. Andy drove into Cork. He'd taken four hours from Sligo, with a short break for a sandwich at Gort. Andy hoped that he would get to Rand before the man left for the airport.

Rand had registered his mobile phone contract to an apartment in the city centre, and Baker had given the apartment's location to Andy.

The last flight from Cork airport was at 1840; a 15-minute drive from Rand's apartment. Andy gambled that Rand would leave it late; it was worth missing the occasional plane because of traffic rather than wasting time at the airport. Andy flew often and challenged himself to arrive at the gate just as it closed; he had to get his kicks somehow.

Rand's apartment was in Albert Quay; a mixed-use high spec building; no expense spared for the mistress. Perhaps he had a big house in the home counties for the wife and children.

Andy didn't know how to approach Rand and walked up to the river to think; the river Lee stretched to his left under a few bridges. The city looked spectacular in the late afternoon sun, and the modern blended with the old. Across from him, stylish restaurants, hotels and

shops besieged a small island. To his right, the river widened and made its way out of town towards the sea.

A ski and hiking shop stood over on the island. Andy crossed the bridge; steel trusses supported the roadway to his left and right. As he crossed, the bright sunshine dazzled him; he squinted, and the world became dark. His vision blurred, and the sun doubled up and burned harder through the blackness.

The girl in the ski shop was locking the door.

‘Can I grab something please?’

‘OK, you’re just in time, I’ve not cashed up yet.’

Andy strolled over and picked up a ski mask from a rack, he chose gloves too.

The girl eyed him as Andy handed over the goods. ‘You must fly a fair way to get snow at this time of year.’

‘Yeah, Whistler, we’ve got friends out in Vancouver.’

Andy paid, stuffed the mask and gloves into his pockets, and re-crossed the bridge to stand outside the building containing Rand’s apartment.

Andy walked up the steps; a chain coffee shop inside the foyer, and a man at a desk blocking the route to the offices and apartments above the reception area.

Andy entered the coffee shop and removed a bottle of water from the fridge. The chill from the air conditioning was welcome. Still no idea what to do, he sat at a table and watched the barrier; no one entered or

left. After about half an hour Andy bought a cake and another water but kept his eye on the entrance gate.

At 1730, a man dressed in cream chinos, with a check shirt, and sunglasses folded in the pocket, emerged from the lift. The man was around fifty years old and carried a leather holdall. A woman, about thirty with a great tan, accompanied him; she wore a summer dress and big sunglasses over her eyes. The woman kissed the man at the barrier before he walked through and into the foyer. She returned to the lift.

The man spoke with the concierge and then walked out of the building and into the heat. The man turned right and strolled down a ramp.

With the man out of sight, Andy approached the concierge at the main desk.

‘Is Bill Rand still here? I’ve got a delivery for him; it’s urgent.’

‘You’ve just missed him, but if you go down the ramp into the car park, you’ll catch him before he goes, I’ll buzz open the gate.’

‘Thanks.’

The ramp led down to a gate and a pedestrian entrance. Andy pressed the button on the door and the catch released; a few cars in the bays.

Rand was over the other side of the garage putting his leather holdall into the passenger seat of a black Range Rover. Andy put on the ski mask and walked over to

him. Rand turned and saw the ski mask, but too late. Andy swung before he had decided where the punch should land. His fist glanced off Rand's jaw, hurt Andy more than he expected and only half-dropped the man. Rand grabbed his sleeve. Andy hit him again, lower this time, with the heel of his hand into the side of the neck. Rand folded against the bumper instead of falling cleanly. Andy had to shove, swear, slip on the polished concrete and wrestle him into the empty boot of the Range Rover. It was not neat. It was only done.

Andy opened the holdall and found a cricket ball inside the inner compartment; it had the same soapy feel as the duck from Steve's cabin bag. Andy got behind the wheel, and programmed the sat nav for the airport, he took off the mask and left it on the passenger seat.

Andy drove up the ramp and headed south through the city and down the N27; the radio played the World Cup final. It was at the end of the second half, England 1-France 1. The commentators seemed sure it would be extra time, both teams had taken their foot off the gas and put their foot on the ball. 'It's anyone's game, first one to blink, not a classic,' the commentator said.

Andy thought of Max again. They'd followed England's journey through the early rounds of the tournament. Sam had joined them, but had tired by halftime, and Jess had put him to bed during the group games. Sam had stayed up for the quarter and semi-final though, hooked by the penalty shootouts.

And now Rand, and his people had put an end to this journey for Andy and Max. There was banging from the boot; Andy glanced backwards. The man had smashed the edge of the boot cover away at the sides. The roll top snagged at one end, but it was bulging in the middle. Rand would be out in a few minutes. There was nowhere to stop.

Andy floored the throttle. Up to a 140 km/hr. He saw a business park appear on the right at the outskirts of the airport; ten minutes since they left the car park.

Andy turned; the second clip of the roll cover released, and Rand kicked it off, rolled the flapping plastic back and clambered into the back seats.

'I suggest you park up.' Rand gripped Andy around the neck from the rear seats.

Andy pulled up to a deserted office unit and parked in the first bay.

'Now what?' said Andy.

Rand squeezed. Andy felt the blood drain from his brain. He clawed at Rand's arm and found only shirt cuff, watch strap, warm skin. The steering wheel blurred. His left hand slapped uselessly at the horn, then the dashboard, then nothing helpful at all. He was not planning now. He was trying not to disappear.

Andy got one breath because Rand shifted his grip to finish the choke. Andy turned his face, opened his mouth and bit whatever part of Rand was closest. Wrist.

Tendon. Shirt. Skin. He bit like an animal, not a man with a tactic. Blood filled his mouth and panic made him bite harder. Rand punched him around the ear with his free hand; the blow rang through Andy's skull, but the arm around his throat loosened. Andy fell out through the driver's door, retched once onto the tarmac and dragged himself round to the rear before Rand could get his feet under him.

'That wound looks bad, let me dress it for you.' Andy heard how absurdly polite he sounded and spat blood onto the concrete. Purple blood gushed from Rand's wrist. Not a bright red and pumping arterial bleed, but enough to make the man stare at his own hand as if it belonged to someone else.

'There's a first aid kit in the boot,' Rand said, while pinching the wound shut.

Andy got the kit and tore two wrappers before one opened. His fingers shook so badly the first pad fell adhesive-side down into grit. He used the second, wound the bandage too tight, loosened it when Rand swore, then fixed it with a safety pin that bent before it closed.

'Sit against the tyre.' Andy directed the injured man over to the rear of the vehicle.

'You'll live if I get you over to the medical room in the airport in the next half an hour.' Andy showed the cricket ball to Rand, though the hand holding it would not stay still. 'Are you taking this to PKL?'

'Yes, I'll attend a meeting there tomorrow at 9.00 a.m.'

'Where's my son?'

'I know nothing about your son?'

'Tell me what you know but be quick about it.'

'We built PKL's new facility for them a few years ago, and they've given us plenty more work since then. Not just construction work. We've helped them with IT issues; I've got a man in London who freelanced for us. He got greedy and wouldn't hand over his last project until we paid him more.'

He blinked hard, fighting the blood loss and the temptation to stop talking. 'Rand moves things,' he said, as if correcting a job description. 'People, bags, doctors, trucks. Laws sells the reason afterwards.'

At the terminal doors he forgot which pocket held the cricket ball and slapped at himself like a man on fire. Passport, phone, holdall, ball. He checked them twice, then a third time, because the first two checks had not entered his head properly.

'My son's in a coma somewhere, kidnapped by a man from a hospital bed. If you can think of anything else, then I would appreciate it.'

'If that's your boy they've got then don't give him that Reflux stuff in the cricket ball neat. You must dilute it with a small amount of the sedative powder in controlled amounts and bring him out. PKL killed enough people in trials before they got the

concentrations right. PKL sent a man to Sligo today to collect more sedative after that drunk Bradley hid the last batch in a journalist's cabin bag.'

Rand's eyes kept sliding shut. Andy slapped his cheek, harder than he meant to. Rand came back with a wet breath.

'Listen,' Rand said. 'ADAM isn't your boy. It guesses how a damaged brain answers. Reflux buys the body a way back. PKL keeps the paper clean. Genesis is Laws' sales word. That's the horror. They learned to confuse a response with a person and then built a business case around the confusion.'

He pushed a plastic folder towards Andy with two fingers. The first page was not dramatic: dose tables, timings, fallback percentages. The last column carried a heading that made Andy's mouth go dry: SUBJECT COMPLIANCE AFTER RETURN.

Rand fell unconscious. Andy dragged him into the rear seats and drove to the airport with the windows down because the car smelled of blood and fear. He parked close to the terminal and called the emergency services from Rand's phone. He wiped the phone, the steering wheel and the gear selector, then noticed a smear on the door handle and wiped that too. He did not wipe the seat belt. He did not see the blood on his cuff until he was already walking away with the holdall. At security, he flashed the printed boarding pass onto the sensor. No queue. In the shops, he bought talcum powder from the pharmacy, dusted the sides of his hair and made

himself look less like Rand and more like a frightened man who had lost a fight with a bathroom cabinet. He put Rand's sunglasses over his eyes and hoped the gate team were tired rather than officious.

'Sorry, sir the gate's now closed.'

No chance to try the poor disguise. Andy needed to get back to England; he also needed to find Roberts, who had collected the sedative from Sligo.

On his walk back to security, Andy saw a man sitting on a chair at one of the other gates, watching the football on a phone screen. Andy paused and watched over the man's shoulder.

The World Cup final was in extra time. England's goalkeeper took down the French striker in the box. It was a penalty clear as day. The referee pointed to the spot.

THIRTY-FOUR

Rob had stood guard near Amy all day and sat outside the ward watching the football on his phone when Janet arrived. 'You've got a visitor Amy,' he said.

'Hello love, I brought you these.' Janet had flowers, and she placed them in a vase by the bedside.

'I'm not sure I'll live up to your standards as a police officer,' Amy said to Janet.

'Has Mike been talking to you behind my back? It looks like you'll need a little break, but I hear you've got plans that will keep you busy a while. Are these the only flowers you've got?'

'There are stacks of chocolates and Jelly Beans; all opened next to the bedside. I've had lots of the men coming to see me, but I've not told my parents or family yet, as I'm not ready for it.'

'I'm not surprised, how are you?'

'Not that bad, I was groggy earlier on, after the operation, but I'm OK; they're giving me something for the pain. Mike tells me you're well acquainted with Bill Rand and Bob Simpkin.'

'I came across Bill Rand years ago; when you were a baby. Rand was part of the reason I spent time in

prison.'

'Prison?'

'Ah, Mike didn't tell you that bit. I got eighteen months, and it's not been easy to get work since I got out.'

'Nooo!' A shout from outside the doors of the ward. Janet walked over to investigate. Janet found Rob beating his knee with his hand.

'Penalty,' he said.

Janet shut the door and returned to Amy.

'Rand was just a small-time gangster back then; a leader though and a fraudster. His first big scam was a call centre in prison. Rand told the prison service that the prisoners in his program sold insurance, a way to teach them skills before release. The prisoners were impersonating bank staff and extracting telephone banking codes and pin numbers from the victims. The scam had a low hit rate but wiped out the savings of the unlucky few pensioners that fell for it.'

'Did Rand get charged?'

'There wasn't enough evidence to charge him, but I headed up a unit that watched his activities. Rand moved on to internet fraud in the mid-nineties; both in the UK and over in the USA. Rand's brother-in-law, a man called Bob Simpkin, shared a room with a man named Josiah Taylor Junior, at university. Taylor's father made billions from computer hardware, back in the eighties. Taylor's father moved into networking

equipment, as the internet took off, and sent his son over to university in the UK, where I met him.'

'You were at university with him?'

'No, I didn't go to university. The rector at Taylor's college suspected fraudulent activity with grades and called the police. Taylor was bright, but lazy; he never attended lectures but achieved a double first. Simpkin was a computer whizz and had hacked the computer, changed Taylor's grades and embezzled money from the university bank account. You couldn't do it these days, security is too good.'

'So how did that end up with you going to prison?'

'During the lead up to Simpkin's court case, I became suspicious when I submitted the case file to the CPS, and they threw it out. When I reviewed the file, the computer evidence was missing, and someone destroyed the original hardware and all the records. Our IT men traced a hack to the home of Simpkin, who was out on bail with Taylor, and I took a team with me to arrest him and seize computer equipment. When we arrived, I found Simpkin sat at a desk and a man with a headset on connected to a computer; the man looked like he was asleep; his eyes flickered.'

'Was the man hooked up to the computer Taylor?'

'No, it was another man, a fit athletic man, not pasty and overweight like Simpkin and Taylor. I ordered my officers to seize all the equipment and arrested Simpkin for hacking the police computers. When we turned the

hardware off, the man in the chair convulsed. It turned out he was on a drug, and when the electrical signals died from the headset, his brain compensated. We gave the man first aid, but he didn't make it.'

'Who was he?'

'A friend of Taylor's. Simpkin had developed a virtual reality game and drugged the player to improve a direct neural connection to the computer system through the headset. The jury deemed me reckless and convicted me of manslaughter.'

'So, what's this got to do with what's going on now?'

'Bob Simpkin was the man killed in the theatre on Friday night. I've been following Rand and Simpkin since I got released; a personal vendetta to collect evidence against them; hence my job at the garage where Simpkin parked his car. PKL has been funding much of Rand's construction work; Ranto has built data centres all over Europe and America for PKL. We should call CID; it might be useful for them.'

'You could ask Rob outside to call Mike Baker.'

Rob stared at his phone screen and rocked backwards with his fist clenched. Janet returned to Amy. 'I'll wait awhile; Rob looks busy.'

'I'll call Jamie; Jamie's with Mike, you can tell him what you told me.'

Amy called Jamie and got voicemail. Amy then called Mike and got voicemail too, so she looked at the

tracking app on her phone. Jamie's last location was a PKL building, somewhere in the middle of Lincolnshire. Her head cleared, and Amy dialled the duty officer at the station.

'I can't get in touch with Mike Baker or Jamie, they've gone a long way off borough to make enquiries. They seem to be in a factory up in Lincolnshire, and they might be in danger.'

'Hi Amy, I'll call them, what makes you think they're in danger?' said the duty officer.

'I've got a source that tells me that PKL is behind the killings on Friday and Saturday.'

'All right Amy, leave it with me.'

'When is the wedding?' Janet said.

'My mum has already booked the venue; a space available on a Wednesday in October. Most of our friends are shift workers anyway, so fine by me. My mum bought a binder ready to get it all planned; she enjoys organising.'

'And Jamie?'

'Jamie won't want much input, but you never know, we'll see when all this has settled down, and we've got time at home together. I'm more worried about telling my mum about my injury. My mum never wanted me to join the police, or wanted me to do anything, apart from getting married, having children, and marrying a man who would support me.'

‘Why did the man hit you on the crossing?’

‘Because I recognised him from the custody suite where he killed Jake McGuire.’

‘Why did he kill McGuire?’

‘I don’t know. Before Jake died, he seemed keen to talk.’

Rob grinned as he walked into the room. ‘Sorry for interrupting; we won. You two were the only people close by, and I had to speak to someone, realise that you’re not a football fan Amy.’

‘You said a penalty against us?’ Janet said.

‘The video referee asked for a review and overruled the original decision; the game ended in a penalty shoot-out, and we won. World champions.’

‘Rob, sorry to bring you back to the mundane,’ Amy said. ‘Did you watch that CCTV footage you took from the pub in Covent Garden on Friday night? I like football, but Wales didn’t qualify.’

‘No, I booked in the CCTV recording; there was no reason to view it as it didn’t cover the scene of the attempted robbery, just the street around the back. CID sifted through the theatre coverage with a fine-tooth comb, nothing on it.’

‘Would you mind bringing me the footage? I’ve got time to kill and want to do something useful.’

‘You’ve got your wedding planned already? Sure, I’ll get Tim to upload it to a link, you can watch it from your

phone.'

'Thanks Rob, congratulations on the win.'

'Nothing to do with me, it's down to our colossus in goal, with help from the video referee.'

THIRTY-FIVE

Mackey's arm was now in plaster with his fingers poking out the ends; he'd dispensed with the sling. 'I'll take more care of you this time. This is for the broken wrist.' Mackey kicked Jamie in the side. Jamie slumped in the chair; his hands were cable tied to the chair legs.

Mike sat across the room, also tied; there was no one to hear him and Jamie if they shouted. The floor was concrete, and air conditioning units and water tanks surrounded them. One side of the room was open to the warehouse; a safety rail protected against falls over the edge. Jamie guessed they were on the third floor.

Julia entered the plant room from a door in the corner; she no longer wore the blue overshoes.

'Sorry for having to wrestle with you downstairs. The last thing I want is for either of you to get hurt. Do you understand Mackey?' The bear nodded. 'My brother's a police officer, and I never wanted it to turn out like this.' A few tears rolled down Julia's cheek.

'Get us out of here, and we'll do all we can to help you.' Mike said. 'Don't make it any worse.'

'It can't get any worse; my stretch in prison would be lengthy. I'll get out of here soon, and I'll let you go.'

‘What are you doing? Do you have the missing boy?’

‘Yes, he’s here, safe for the moment, in the best place for him.’

Jamie found the heat oppressive. ‘How can this place be better than a hospital bed?’

‘We’ve got him down in the medical centre, in the basement. It’s cool, and he’s got a team looking after him.’ Julia wiped another tear from her eye and used a handkerchief to rub her brow.

‘Have you got children?’ Mike said.

‘Only one child. You’ll meet him soon.’ Julia walked towards the door to leave.

Mike tried to keep Julia talking. ‘Who’s the dead man downstairs?’

‘He’s a civil servant called Patrick Laws. He wanted to kill me, so I killed him first.’

‘End this now and plead self-defence in court.’

‘I killed Laws in cold blood, and there’s the kidnapping too, but I’ve got a man who will help me disappear. It will be best for everyone.’

‘If we don’t check-in soon, people will look for us.’

‘That makes sense.’ Julia had stopped crying. ‘Would you like to make a call?’

‘Show us the boy and what you’re up to, and we’ll play along with you a while.’

'Tie their ankles Mackey, so they can't run, and meet me downstairs.' Julia disappeared through the door.

Mackey used the cuffs he'd taken from Jamie's and Mike's jackets to restrain their ankles. 'Follow me,' he said.

Jamie and Mike shuffled along and made their way down the steel staircase. Two men patrolled behind them, both armed. They arrived at a landing, passed through a door with a push bar, and were on the second floor where men in overalls scrubbed the carpets.

'We'll wait here a while, we've arranged transport for you.' Mackey stood looking at his two captives. Men with a gurney, carrying a swollen black body bag, pushed past.

The lift arrived a minute afterward. 'Who's first?' Mackey said. Nobody volunteered. 'You.' Mackey took Jamie by the shoulder and pushed him into the chair.

Mackey secured Jamie's legs and arms to the wheelchair. The lift came back a few minutes later, and transported Jamie and a minder to the ground floor, and then Mike and his guard joined them.

The minders stuffed their weapons in their waistbands and pushed the wheelchairs out onto the main floor. Yellow walkways crossed the concrete, each with different coloured lines running through them. Red and blue lines branched off; orange and green lines joined as the group weaved through the stacks of black humming machines. Jamie noticed that they followed the white

path. The journey took about ten minutes, and he used the time to rest.

The white line stopped at a circular cylinder, rising from the floor to the roof, amongst the racks of machines. Next to the cylinder stood a cube about eight feet tall and eight feet wide. A door in the cube gave access to stairs and a lift to basement level.

Mackey touched his pass onto the sensor on the cube, and the lift door opened. On arrival in the basement, Jamie gazed upwards and realised that the cylinder was a light well. Mike arrived a minute later.

Julia stood in the bright underground atrium.

‘Welcome to my bunker. I insisted on the natural light, I’ve spent a large part of the last few years in here and might have gone mad without it.’

‘Thanks for the tour, much appreciated,’ said Mike.

‘You won’t judge me when I show you my work.’ Julia turned and entered a room off the atrium.

Jamie and Mike followed, pushed by their silent guards. Mackey wasn’t with them anymore and must have stayed up top. The room they entered had a glass partition in the centre, and on the other side was Max, stood up and strapped to a vertical bed. A metal helmet enclosed Max’s head, and his feet were on moving steps, like a hill climb machine at the gym.

‘We’ve patented the bed. It rotates backwards at night, and we turn down the power, so he can get rest. In the

daytime, the machine administers passive exercise. Max could live there in reasonable health for a month.

There's a phone across the hall, will you make the call now?'

A narrow monitor above the bed changed colour without celebration. PREDICTED RESPONSE: CALM. Under it, a smaller line appeared and then vanished: MOTOR RESPONSE EARLY / SOURCE CONFLICT. Max's left hand tightened against the restraint before the machine had finished drawing the stimulus curve. Julia saw Jamie read the screen and looked away first.

'I must know a little more first,' Mike said. He saw the likeness to Andy in Max, tall with powerful shoulders. Mike guessed Andy would still win in a wrestle, but not long before the youngster would be stronger than his dad.

'I'll tell you why PKL built this place.' Julia sat in a chair facing Mike and Andy. 'Not the version Laws tells investors. The real one.'

'I'd settle for the version that helps the boy on the other side of that glass,' said Mike.

'PKL began as neuro-rehabilitation. Severe brain injury, locked-in patients, people whose brains still produced intention but whose bodies could no longer express it. The public promise was decent: read the signal, stimulate the damaged circuit, give function back.'

'But you don't believe that's what this is now?' said Jamie.

‘No. The early work used computer models to predict neural responses. Models, not souls. Laws and Taylor never accepted the distinction. A response became survival. A resemblance became preservation.’

‘So, what are you doing?’

‘Closed-loop neuro-recovery,’ Julia said. ‘That was the approved phrase. Reflux opens the chemical bridge. ADAM predicts the response. PKL hides the route from patient to product. Max is caught between them.’

She pointed to the glass rather than the screen. ‘The early limits were blunt for a reason: one patient, no external network, short exposure, recovery time between cycles. Done carefully, it might help someone speak, move or wake. Done like this, it turns a living brain into material.’

‘Why would you want to do that?’

‘I didn’t want this.’ Julia looked through the glass at Max. ‘Adam was a patient first, then a dataset, then a sales pitch. That is the order in which we lost him.’

‘Tell us please,’ said Mike. ‘We don’t need a Bond villain speech.’

‘Laws wants ownership of intention. That is his phrase, not mine. Recovery, preservation, compliance risk management: he changes the label according to the buyer. Laws sells the clean word and hides the dirty method.’

‘Max?’ said Andy.

Julia started to answer with the word evidence. Andy turned so sharply that she stopped.

‘Don’t call him that,’ Andy said.

Julia looked back through the glass. ‘No. Max is the patient.’ She nearly said asset; Jamie saw the word stop behind her teeth. ‘He is also the reason they cannot bury the work.’

She touched the glass with the backs of her fingers. ‘Max remembered the smell of the room before he remembered the room. He reacted to his father’s voice before the speaker trace showed recognition. Those are not investor metrics. They are a boy trying to get back before the model learns to answer for him.’

Andy stared at Max. The helmet, the straps and the moving bed no longer looked futuristic. They looked clinical, expensive and cruel.

Julia touched the glass. ‘This was meant to be a prosthetic cortex, not a replacement person. ADAM can suggest a route. The patient still has to come back through it.’

‘That still sounds close to science fiction,’ said Mike.

‘Only if you call the model a person. It is not. A model can guide treatment. It can also contaminate the patient if it starts using another person’s pattern as a shortcut.’

‘Why Max?’

'Because I was on a deadline and did not have time to wait for Tichi to synthesise more priming compound. Max had already absorbed a diluted dose by mistake. That made him available.' Julia looked at Andy before she finished. 'That is the ugliest truth, and the only honest one.'

Andy looked through the glass. Max's fingers twitched once against the sheet, too small for the monitor to celebrate.

'Not yet, will he be OK?'

'Ah, that brings me to the most interesting part of the story.'

THIRTY-SIX

The Berlingo cruised towards Dublin; late afternoon became early evening. Roberts liked to keep things simple; the security at the ferry port would be less than at the airport, but his current ID would now be on a list, and he needed a temporary identity.

He also needed an identity that would not invite conversation. Airports produced queues, questions and passport glass. Ferry ports produced tired staff, family arguments and men in fleece jackets looking for the right lane.

Roberts retraced the journey back to Dublin, this time clockwise around the M50 before turning South. He stayed North of the Liffey and rather than cross the bridge to Ringsend; he stopped and parked near a cinema.

The cinema was part of a leisure complex containing shops and cafes; a few people milled around in the square outside, but none of the men looked like Roberts. It was pointless trying the shops; men like Roberts wouldn't be there, they'd buy their polo shirts and jeans online.

Inside the cinema's bright foyer, Roberts gazed at the timber-clad columns which soared thirty metres

between the glazed facade. Another building obscured the view to the Liffey, and Roberts looked at it for a few minutes; it would be the main attraction tonight. It was an arena, and a queue formed outside it.

Roberts strolled through the public square and rubbed his neck; the midday sun had scorched him. Back to Kimmel: 'Don't come back though, please.' Roberts had never intended to go back, but Eamon's earlier invitation was welcome. The Kimmel dwelling had ended up just one more place that breathed a sigh of relief when Roberts left.

The queue outside the arena grew. As Roberts turned the corner, the line snaked around temporary fencing; a full house tonight, perfect.

The head of the snake disappeared between two pillars in front of an opening in the stone, with no way in without causing a disturbance. Roberts walked to the South of the building; it faced straight onto the Liffey, fewer people congregated here, and black railings blocked entry from the riverside.

Roberts jumped at one of the ten-foot stone posts. He kicked the pillar with his foot, caught the capstone with his hands and heaved himself to the top. The bad shoulder complained before the good one. Roberts dropped down on the other side, landing on the balls of his feet. He'd once seen a man get this wrong; the man had recovered a few months later.

He landed cleanly, but his right shoulder answered late, a dull warning from the field and the ferry crossing. He ignored it because there was still enough strength to spend.

Roberts was in a courtyard car park surrounded by locked gates; two or three people in the yard. The bystanders heard the thud, as Roberts landed behind a van, but were too busy checking their phones to take any interest. The South face of the building had glazed arches in the stone wall. One door in the glass was open, and Roberts walked through it.

He climbed stairs and stepped onto a bridge. Other bridges to his left and his right linking the original stone facade with the new blockwork construction inside the building. Gunmetal panels clad the block walls and shifted in depth like terraced fields.

The bridge's guardian was about six-feet-tall with a light build, wearing a dark suit. The steward had a radio with a microphone clipped to his ear.

'Can I see your pass please?'

'I'm here for the show; I must have got lost.'

'No access through gate one tonight; no standing; this door is a crew entrance; how did you get in here?'

Roberts felt fatigued from his day in the field and was glad the man was light. He reached out, grabbed the steward's tie and pulled the man towards him; Roberts spun the man around and stopped the blood supply to

his brain until he passed out. The steward would be OK; he was even getting paid to be unconscious. Roberts dragged the steward through the door, relieved that the toilets were nearby. It was a risky manoeuvre, so Roberts walked in first and had a quick check; better to deal with anyone in there first, but the toilets were empty.

When he straightened, his fingers closed a fraction slower than they should have. He hid the delay by checking the cuff of the stolen jacket.

The day had begun to tax him in pieces: shoulder, hand, breath, then judgement. He could still force each part to work, but force was taking longer.

Roberts bundled the steward into a cubicle and changed into his clothes; the clothes were a good fit. Roberts sat the man on the toilet and closed the stall; he could see the steward's feet, in the gap below the door; the situation appeared normal.

Roberts returned to the walkway; stone walls rose to his left and new blockwork to his right as he strolled on through a few more turns, descended steep steps, and entered the centre of the arena.

A circus strutted the stage.

A woman dressed as a Peacock flounced past Roberts and smiled; Roberts smiled back. Another steward brushed past him and nodded; Roberts fitted right in with the circus crew.

A row of steps divided the seats and rose to the public entrance to the arena. Roberts figured the steps would lead him back to the building's entrance at the head of the snaking queue. He was right. A few minutes later he was there, and the organisers had set out tables in front of the glass doors.

'We're opening in one minute,' said a woman with a handheld walkie-talkie and no ear clip.

Roberts scanned the staff and stood with two women, next to a bench, in the foyer's centre. There would be more people passing through this channel.

'All right If I help you out here, I'm at a loose end,' Roberts said.

'Please feel free,' said the shorter of the two women.

'We'll do the bag checks. Now you're here do you mind doing the occasional search, if any of the men look dodgy?'

'My pleasure. How many are we going to get tonight?'

'We sold around 8000 tickets.'

The doors opened, and the waiting families entered. Roberts did a quick calculation. On average there would be a mum, a dad and two children, which would mean about 2000 fathers; more like 1500 as a few fathers would ditch the circus and give the ticket to the sister-in-law.

Roberts looked busy. 'Sorry sir, I must give you a quick pat.' But Roberts wasn't as thorough as usual; such a

search would be inappropriate at a children's event.

Roberts counted two hundred men; most wore jeans, a few wore shorts and a few chinos. Overhanging bellies, but the majority were in reasonable shape.

A candidate approached.

'I must give you a little check over sir.' The man's son seemed pleased.

'I told you you'd get searched Dad.'

'I always do, must have a guilty face.' Roberts realised that this was not the man for him. The man's front teeth were missing. Roberts released the dentist dodger into the circus.

Ten minutes later, a wiry man with expensive brogues and designer jeans approached with his wife. They had one child with them, about ten years old. The man's hair was a little longer than Roberts's hair, but his face had a similar shape.

No need to make this problematic Roberts thought.

'Hello mate, doing random spot checks, do you have any ID with you?'

'Sure, will a driving licence do?'

'Perfect.' Roberts meant it.

The man reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone; he'd stashed his credit card and his driving licence in the cover. The man fumbled like a sloth wearing mittens to get the licence out.

‘Do you mind if I help you?’ The question was rhetorical. Roberts took the phone and smiled as he did it. ‘Sorry, want to be as quick as I can.’

The man didn’t look impressed to have his phone taken out of his hands, but there was no point making a fuss; he didn’t take his eyes off Roberts though.

Which was OK, Roberts liked deception in plain sight; conjuring could have been another potential career for him. Roberts took out the driving licence, held it up in front of the man and gave him his phone and case back. Roberts drew the man’s attention by staring up and jerking, as if he had a twitch.

‘Thanks for that, here’s your licence back.’ Roberts handed back a licence with the photo side down, and the man put it back in his case. The family walked off to enjoy the circus show.

‘Back in a second,’ Roberts said to his temporary colleagues.

‘No bother.’

Roberts walked out the doors against the flow of people and carried on walking all the way to the Berlingo.

Using his phone, he booked a foot passenger ticket on the ferry leaving at 9.00 p.m. to Liverpool. Roberts used Matthew Sykes’s credit card for the booking; he would be out in the Irish sea before Sykes rose to buy refreshments at the interval.

Roberts had about an hour until check-in closed for foot passengers. He left the Berlingo in the lot, and walked North, and then East, with the sun now warming his neck.

THIRTY-SEVEN

The World Cup final. The French striker had stood on the shoulder of the last defender close to the halfway line for the last half hour, then the ball he craved arrived. England lost possession in the French box. A quick roll from the French goalkeeper reached the central midfielder, who launched the sweetest pass of the match. It was a foot race with only one winner. The French striker collected the ball and ran into the England penalty area with just the goalkeeper to beat. He pulled back his foot to shoot as the England goalkeeper clattered into his ankles and sent him flying into the goalmouth. It was the most obvious and cynical foul he had ever received. No problem though; he had not missed a penalty since turning professional, and the keeper would get a red card. England had no more substitutions left. The striker would take his time and make sure.

Andy watched these events unfold over the shoulder of a man in the Cork departure lounge, who streamed the match live to his phone. The man sensed Andy watching and looked around at him.

'Take a seat mate, I'd rather not see this alone anyway,' the man said with an English accent.

Rather not watch this alone. Andy's thoughts turned to Max, and he boiled with frustration.

The referee pointed at the spot and reached into his pocket for the red card. England's goalkeeper walked to the tunnel, resigned to his fate, he wanted to get out of there.

The man in the departure lounge unplugged his earphones so that the commentary came out of the phone speaker. A few others crowded around behind them.

The referee didn't get his card out but reached for his ear and then walked over to the video replay station, a screen in a clear box near the halfway line.

'The video ref has seen something,' said the commentator. 'He'll look at the replay. I don't know what he's seen. That's a penalty all-day long and into next week. It's a clear penalty and a red card, might as well put us out of our misery.'

The replay of the goal came onto the phone screen, and the French striker surged into the area, the angle of the shot from behind the goal. The Frenchman flew into the air and tumbled into the goal mouth.

'Can't see anything from that angle but there was clear contact. You saw it in real time.' the commentator said.

Another angle this time, from a camera on the touchline with high zoom. The French player jump, before the English keeper arrived, and then executed a perfect

forward roll into the goal. The ball rolled into the keeper's prone form.

'I don't believe it.' said the commentator. 'We heard the contact from up here.'

'I'd like to view that again,' said his sidekick.

The tv station obliged and showed the replay again in slow time. It showed the French player jumping and rolling into the goal. There was no contact from the English keeper who stood up and held the ball in his hands.

The referee ran back onto the pitch. No foul. Three toots of the whistle and a penalty shoot-out to decide the winner of the World Cup.

The gathering in the departure lounge had increased. One man left a queue from a gate that was closing and seemed happy to miss his flight. The group knew how to handle such a situation; they had experience.

'I fancy our chances now,' the man with the phone said. 'The French have lost it.'

He was right. The French players were apoplectic. They surrounded the referee and were shouting in his face. It took five minutes for the referee to regain control; the big screen in the stadium showed no foul. The French striker wondered whether he'd suffered a concussion when he landed from the tackle. Was the pain in his ankles imagined?

The man with the phone turned out to be a prophet. England won the penalty shoot-out 5-0, the French had lost their heads after the disallowed penalty claim.

Andy felt a surge of energy and a determination to arrive at Max's side as soon as possible.

He called Mike Baker to tell him about PKL's involvement with the brain drugs. No answer.

Andy checked the flights to the UK. He'd missed the last one out of Cork, and none out of Dublin either that he would make. He considered getting a room in one hotel at the airport for the night, but the thought of an empty hotel room was not appealing. Andy wanted to be near people, near his family: Jess, Max and Sam.

Getting drunk at a bar in the city was the next best choice. If he found one open late enough, then he'd save himself the room rate too. He worked his way out of departures and explained his missed flight at security.

Plenty of cabs lined up to take him back to the city; Andy tossed Rand's holdall onto the seat next to him and rifled through the contents.

'Where are you going?' the cab driver said.

'Take me to a decent bar, one that's open late.'

'I know just the place.' The driver pulled out of the airport and headed back into town; he retraced the route North up the N27 and back up to the river and crossed the bridge to Lapp Island when Andy spotted Rand's girlfriend; she wore the same dress and

sunglasses.

'Can you stop here please?'

'No bother.' The taxi stopped. Andy stood on the bank of the river Lee and watched the woman walk West and then cross a bridge; there would be time for a snoop around Rand's apartment before she got back.

Rand had stuffed his wallet with credit cards, a driver's licence, a fuel card and two blank cards with no discernible purpose. The man at the lobby desk was different; there must have been a shift change. Andy tapped one of the blank cards onto the sensor at the entrance gate.

The door to a lift opened, which made things easier. Andy entered the lift and ten seconds later he was eleven storeys up, and out on a landing. He opened the only door on the landing using the other blank card.

The penthouse was about 20, 000 square feet with views across the river to the North, and along the river to the East and West. The décor was modern for a man of Rand's age, and Andy figured that he'd had help.

Andy searched the apartment; not much trace of Rand: no business documents or laptops; it was a place for Rand to escape. The only hint he lived a photo of him meeting a mayor somewhere, both with big cheesy grins and gold chains visible. They were on top of a building in a city that Andy didn't recognise. Rand looked to be in his mid-twenties in the photo.

A painting hung in the kitchen area and the walls were grey. The floor looked like marble, but Andy knew it was concrete with a marbled finish, with underfloor heating too. Rugs were thrown over the floor near the sofa and TV.

The holdall buzzed. Rand's phone showed a new message. The phone required a pin. Andy tried 0000. Two more attempts. He tried 9999.

Andy paused and thought; one more chance. His eyes flicked back to the photo on the wall, not a great picture, so the event must be important. He studied it; lots of men in the background, one of them wore a white baseball cap with a logo of a character juggling a football. There was writing on the hat that Andy couldn't make out.

The red, white and green blocks formed the character on the logo. Andy typed Italia 90 into his own phone's browser and checked the images. The logo showed up on the third row. The other pictures on the page showed footballers with mullet haircuts and took Andy back to his childhood: when he was Max's age, before he left for university. There had been friction with his parents, a struggle for independence but an unwillingness to accept the responsibility that went with it.

He typed 1990 into Rand's phone and the screen unlocked. The message was from Julia Matthews. 'Meet Roberts from Ferry - Liverpool 5.30 a.m.'

Steve would have turned the Italia '90 guess into a story by now. Andy wrote the number down instead. There was no one left to make the clever part feel funny.

Andy replied: 'Received.'

He called Mike Baker again; there was no answer. He checked the ferries from Cork, but he could only get to France or Spain.

A click sounded, and the apartment door opened. Andy pushed himself back against the wall in the kitchen, hidden from view. The holdall was on the island in the kitchen's centre. He put his phone, and Rand's, in his trouser pocket; the girlfriend's walk had been a short one.

Andy crept behind the island. The woman came into the kitchen and turned on the kettle; she then switched on the radio and chuckled at a gag the DJ made. Andy smelled her perfume: light and floral to go with the dress. She walked around the island, about to discover Andy; he stood up and said, 'That's all sorted for you, tell Bill I'll send the invoice.'

The woman screamed and said something that Andy didn't hear, and he strode to the door. He left the apartment, descended in the lift and walked back out, through reception and into the street. He got around the corner as fast as possible without breaking into a run.

Andy saw Higgins's Caddy van parked on the street and read the advertisement on the side panels; underneath the phone number were the words:

Higgins Rib Rides

Sligo

Galway

Cork

THIRTY-EIGHT

Amy clicked the link that Tim had emailed and downloaded the video file. At home, Jamie would protest if Amy looked at screens while in bed, the blue light would stop them sleeping. Screens never affected Amy; she could sleep on demand, but not in her hospital bed.

Amy's frustrations with Jamie included his 3 a.m. waking. Jamie was the most restless sleeper in the world, obsessive about getting to bed by ten on his rest days. He'd then roll around all night before getting up at the crack of dawn when the faintest peep of light entered through the curtains.

Viewing CCTV would not be the most exciting evening's entertainment, but at least it kept Amy involved. Closer to Jamie working on the same case. Mike had telephoned earlier to say they were both OK. Jamie's phone had died, but he would call when he'd got a charge. Amy yawned and watched the footage.

The video clip showed a street around the rear of the pub in Covent Garden on Friday evening. People walked, chatted and laughed. A man on a bike came into view and stopped by the corner. Another man arrived, walked up to him, got out a sheet of paper and something else, a small piece of card, perhaps. The walking man pointed

at the piece of card.

Amy recognised the youth on the bike as Jake McGuire, but she'd never seen the other man before. The video played on and Jake disappeared around the corner on his bicycle. Nothing more of interest for thirty minutes, and then Amy saw herself on the screen, in the passenger seat of the van, as it came into view after the arrest.

The recording stopped.

'I'll leave this here. Now I'll go, so you get to rest,' Janet said, and put Amy's keys on the table, next to the bedside.

After the football had finished earlier, Amy had mentioned that she wanted a few things from home; Janet had fetched them for Amy.

'You should put that down now and sleep.'

'Janet, you sound like Jamie. There's not much on it, anyway. The clip shows Jake McGuire and another man before the robbery on Friday night. Amy rewound the recording back to the part where McGuire and the other man were talking.'

'That's Josiah Taylor. He's not changed much.'

'Would you mind getting Rob in here please Janet?'

Rob came in and yawned. 'Night shift will be here in a minute Amy, I don't like to leave you in here but I've got to sleep. I've switched shifts, so I'm back on in the

morning. The Sarge has made sure you've got a capable guard tonight; Frank will be back soon.'

'I appreciate it Rob. Jamie will appreciate it too. I've seen something on the CCTV from outside the pub we should tell Mike Baker about.' Amy played the clip again. 'Janet says the man speaking with Jake McGuire is Josiah Taylor. Taylor disappeared twenty years ago.'

'Well he reappeared on Friday night; that's the man who gave me the CCTV from the theatre.'

Janet said, 'If you know where he might be Rob, I'd arrest him.'

'I guess I'd better get back to the theatre.'

'I'd take backup.'

'We're getting thin on the ground. I'm not leaving Amy here alone and can't see there being many spare tonight.'

'I'll come with you and sit in the car.'

'Frank can come with us too; Frank would be my second choice after Jamie if there's trouble.'

'Give me a few minutes.'

Janet pulled the curtain around Amy and passed the bag she'd brought from Amy's flat. Amy got dressed on the bed.

When Amy pulled the curtain back, she saw a pair of crutches leaning against the table. Amy could see Janet, Rob and Frank through the window in the ward door.

They were waiting outside letting her get ready in her own time.

Amy had used crutches before when she'd broken her leg in childhood. She'd not wanted to climb the tree, but her brother had goaded her, and she was doing well until the branch snapped.

Amy sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the crutches over to her, leant forward, rose and left the ward.

After bad days at work, Amy sometimes presented Jamie with a full analysis, often including her opinion on the presumed thoughts of others. Jamie would advise her to stop thinking, do it and don't worry. Amy would retort: 'You should do that, you're the one who doesn't sleep at night.'

On this occasion, she took Jamie's advice, shut out the fleeting debilitating thoughts and instead looked behind her down the corridor. Amy had already walked a long way; it had been easy.

The group made their way to the police car, and Amy got in the back. Frank sat in the front passenger seat.

'Janet,' Rob said. 'Thanks for all you've done, but please stay away from this one, I'm taking a big enough risk by taking Amy with us.'

'No problem Rob, I'll stay out of the way.'

Rob got into the driver's seat, and the car pulled away. Janet knew their destination so didn't need to follow.

The traffic on the motorway was heavy, and lane discipline was poor; cars zigzagged in a futile mission to cut seconds from journey's that had lasted hours. Occasional pockets appeared in the seventy mph traffic jam, but any drivers that got above seventy soon pegged it back when they saw Rob in the rear-view mirror.

The traffic in town was no better; it never was. The police car arrived outside the theatre at about 2100 on Sunday evening, halfway through a show.

Rob and Frank entered the theatre and spoke to the woman in the foyer, a different lady from Friday.

'We're looking for the man that does the lighting.'

'I'm ever so sorry sir,' said the woman. Someone killed Bob Simpkin on Friday night. 'We had to cancel all the shows yesterday, and we're getting back to normal now.'

'We know all about Friday night, but I don't mean Bob Simpkin; I'd like to talk to his assistant. The man who shared that office with him.' Rob pointed at the door in the foyer marked: 'Staff Only.'

'Not seen him over the weekend. You can have a look around.'

There was another crew in the lighting room; they wore branded T-shirts.

Rob knocked on the door; a head popped out. 'Sorry, we're busy; can we talk later?' a man with short cropped hair and a ginger beard said.

'Won't take long, can't the other man deal with it for a minute?'

The man with the beard came out and shut the door, 'OK how can I help?'

'How long have you been working here?'

'We came in today; we work at one of the other theatres, but we got pulled in because of the situation on Friday.'

'Who showed you around in there? We're looking for one of the lighting men, the one that's not dead.'

'No one showed us around; it's all standard kit; the lighting assistant didn't show up this morning; that's why they called us in.'

'OK thanks, we'll let you get on with it.'

Rob and Frank returned to the foyer. 'Let's check in his office, before we leave.'

'Could you get this door unlocked for us please?' Rob said to the bar lady.

'Sorry, we've not been able to find the keys for that room, someone wanted to get in there earlier.'

'So, Frank, do you think we've got grounds to force entry?'

'Dunno.' Frank smashed his size twelve into the door, shattering the lock.

'Looks like he's moved stuff out. I guess we should seize what's left.'

Amy sat in the police car, watching the people pass by. A grey Volkswagen Golf pulled up and parked on the double yellow lines, outside the theatre, with its nose up against a lamppost. Amy recognised the driver from the CCTV tape; it was Taylor. Taylor got out of the car and walked towards the theatre doors.

Amy phoned Rob. 'Taylor's on his way in Rob, through the front entrance; he's parked outside.'

'Thanks Amy,' Rob turned towards the front entrance and glimpsed Taylor walk into the theatre, spot him and Frank, and walk straight back out again.

Amy watched Rob and Frank chase Taylor towards the Golf. She pulled herself through the gap between the front seats and sat behind the steering wheel. Rob had left the keys in; Amy put her right foot on the clutch which was awkward, turned the ignition and released the pedal.

Taylor got into his car, but before he could start the engine, the police Astra rolled towards his rear bumper and wedged the Golf against the lamppost. Amy locked her doors.

Taylor jumped out of his car and pulled at Amy's door handle, but he gave up as Frank reached him; Taylor ran down the road but didn't get very far. A white Fiat 500 hit Taylor at low speed and knocked him to the floor. Taylor was down briefly but limped to his feet. He ended up on the bonnet of the Fiat again as Frank slammed him down and cuffed him.

Ten minutes later, Taylor and Frank left for the station in a police van.

'Sorry,' Janet said to Rob.

'Don't apologise, but you've scratched your car. I'll give you a hand getting that sorted out next weekend if you like.'

They approached Amy who was still behind the wheel.

'You were a little vigorous on the clutch there Amy, a good job you've not got a police licence, or you'd get points for that.'

'I find you funny Rob, but it hurts when I laugh. Shall we have a look at Taylor's car?'

'Do you want to? I want this day to end.' Rob got Amy's crutches out of the back of the car and opened the front door. They crossed over to the Golf; it had the keys in the ignition. Rob pressed the VW sign on the rear of the vehicle, it clicked, rotated and became a handle.

'Clever Germans,' Rob said.

The boot was empty; they had a look around the rest of the vehicle: about fifteen years old, scratched paint and worn carpets and upholstery.

'Maybe he emptied it and came back to get the rest?' Janet said, as the trio traipsed back to the office in the theatre.

'We'll take the computer, may as well leave the screens.'

'What about that, anything in it?' Amy pointed to a cardboard box on the ground. Rob stooped to investigate.

'I'd say so; petty cash in here, a few thousand pounds worth.'

THIRTY-NINE

'Max can come back,' Julia said. 'That is the only honest promise I can make.'

'Earlier you called him immortal,' Mike said.

'Laws did. Not me.'

'Define the difference,' Jamie said.

Julia looked towards the glass. 'Genes survive. Work survives. Money survives. People die. Laws hated that sentence.'

'So he renamed it,' Jamie said.

'Genesis,' Julia said. 'That was the investor word.'

She opened a folder and turned one sheet round. The printed header said PATIENT RESPONSE. A later sticker covered the word patient with SUBJECT. The sticker was slightly crooked. Nobody had bothered to hide the change properly because nobody expected a family to read the file.

A yellow note sat underneath, written in Laws' square hand: transfer value depends on continuity, not consent. Julia touched the edge of it but did not lift it from the page.

'Point, please,' Mike said.

Jamie kept his eyes on the equipment. 'ADAM is a behavioural model of Max: speech, memory, movement, fear, choice. It predicts him faster than his damaged body can answer.'

'Yes,' Julia said. 'Used carefully, it helps the living brain find a route back.'

'And Laws wants to know whether the route can stay open without the living brain.'

Julia's mouth tightened. 'Laws wanted that. I wanted to bring Max out alive. The difference is not clean enough to save me.'

For the first time she looked directly at Andy. 'I kept telling myself the next objection would be the one that mattered. Ethics committee. Clinical transfer. Consent. Then I discovered that men like Laws enjoy objections because objections create documents, and documents can be routed around.'

'So Genesis is not treatment,' Jamie said.

'It began as treatment.'

'That is not an answer.'

Julia looked at Max through the glass. 'No. It became ownership.'

Andy did not move. Ownership was the first word that made the science simple enough to hate. It was not medicine if the patient could not say no. It was not preservation if the family were only useful as signatures.

Mike shifted in his chair. 'Then stop dressing it up and tell us the rule.'

Julia pressed her thumb against the edge of the desk until the nail whitened. 'ADAM predicts response. Reflux gives the body a route back. Genesis is what Laws calls the part he can sell. Max is not a copy. He is the patient in that room.'

'You'll disappear. And leave all this?'

'We've got another industrial unit. I copied the research data, not Max as a person. A model is not a son. It is evidence, risk and leverage. The best thing for Max is still to taper him out like a patient. Will you make the call now?'

'Give me the phone,' Mike said.

'Use this one here.' Julia wheeled Mike to a desk with a landline on it.

Mike punched Amy's number into the keypad. 'Hi, Amy, how are you doing. Me and Jamie are OK, nothing much here. We will stay over tonight. Jamie's phone is dead, but he'll call you later when he gets a charge. OK, take care.' Mike replaced the receiver.

'Thanks,' Julia said. 'Now I wasn't honest with you. We'll do our best for Max, but I wanted a second-stage comparison before we left.' She looked towards the glass and corrected herself. 'Wanted. I need to know whether the model can separate from the living response without killing the child. I am trying, very late,

to stop calling that progress.'

'And afterwards you'll release me too?'

'Yes.'

'No problem. I'll play along, what time will the drugs arrive?'

'They're coming into Liverpool at 5.30 a.m. With no problems, we should be ready to get started about 9.00 a.m. I'll even cook you breakfast. It's best if you get sleep tonight Jamie, it'll make things easier. Max has done so well because he went under early in the day and he'd eaten something too.'

'Got anything more comfortable than this wheelchair?'

'We've got a ready room next door for you. The memory foam mattress is better than those you'd find in the best hotels; you could fly to the moon on it. Mike, your sleep may not be as good, I'm not leaving you both in the same room. We'll take Mike back to the office block.'

'I'll cope.'

Mike's minder wheeled him to the lift. Jamie's guard pushed him through another door and into the ready room.

The room appeared more like a dentist's surgery than a hospital ward; Jamie's overnight accommodation gleamed. A bed with crisp white sheets and a machine by the side with a lamp and facemask on it. The digital display on the device showed 10.00 p.m.

'You're the first occupant of this room,' Julia said. 'I'd hoped there would be more soon, but looks like there will be a little delay before I bring you company. I might even join you soon if things go well. Hope you find it comfortable enough; if you have any problems in the night, call me using the bell. I'll come and look after you myself. Do you need a sedative?'

'I'll be OK thanks.'

'I'll give you a mild one to get you to sleep and to protect us while we get you from the chair to the bed. Mackey told me about the damage you did earlier at the construction site. It'll be a mild dose as I don't want it to interfere with the procedure in the morning.'

Julia took a needle and a swab from a drawer in a unit next to the bed. She wiped Jamie's forearm with the swab, inserted the needle into his vein and delivered the payload.

Jamie lost consciousness and dreamt.

The last thing he felt was not fear but embarrassment: his body had believed Julia's calm voice before his mind had finished refusing it.

Jamie ran through a field of wheat, cut short, harvest time. The sun shone as it had all summer, but the air was fresher, it was early morning, and it had rained for the first time in months. Jamie touched the soil at the base of the cut wheat; it was soft but not muddy, a few crumbs stuck to his hand and he tasted them, they had the texture of butter or clay. Jamie inhaled an aroma of

custard tinged with mustard.

Jamie reached the rocky steps; he bounded up to the coastal path above the cliffs. The air cooled, and the sky darkened. It was still morning, but a bleaker one; the clouds tumbled, rumbled and churned. There was no rain, not yet, but it was coming, and it would stay; the end of summer approached.

Jamie noticed a fisherman, down below on the beach; Jamie jumped from the cliff, soared a little, and executed a perfect landing next to the fisherman.

'Hello,' Jamie said.

'Hi Jamie. You took your time, I've already filled the bucket.' The bucket was a clear plastic with the picture of a smiling crab on it. You pull in the next one. The fisherman handed the line to Jamie.

Jamie pulled and heaved.

'It's stuck.' Jamie carried on and felt a little sick. He tried to speak but couldn't; Jamie couldn't pull on the line; he couldn't see.

And then he saw.

Jamie woke in the ready room with his arms tied to the rails on the side of the bed, but his legs were free. He pulled against the ties, but they didn't yield. The clock on the lamp unit showed: 03:00 a.m.

FORTY

At the same time above the Irish Sea, a few pinpricks of light punctured the black canvas. Roberts sat on deck in his shirt sleeves in the twenty-degree heat. He had bought a cabin below, but his neighbours were having a difficult passage.

It sounded like the dad had food poisoning and was dry retching into the toilet bowl. The wife had lost patience and took the kids outside for a walk.

Left alone, the dad calmed himself.

The wife came back to check on the man every half hour, and that started the whole episode up again; Roberts suspected that the man just wanted peace.

Roberts had climbed to the upper deck in search of peace. The deckchair was better than the mattress in his cabin. He had tied his rucksack to his arm with spare laces he always carried, threaded through the bag's loop to deter any passing dipper. Theft was unlikely at this hour, and unwise for the thief who tried.

Roberts had slept under many stars and, on balance, preferred the Northern Hemisphere. He pictured Orion and stared at the brightest star just below the belt; he couldn't remember its name. Then he found the red glow above the belt: Betelgeuse. How could he forget

that name?

The red giant faded as his eyes closed. Roberts heard a distant hum from an outboard motor as he drifted between wakefulness and sleep; a smaller boat, perhaps an inshore lifeboat on a call? The noise vanished after a minute or two and Roberts slept.

He awoke thirty minutes later; a hoist lifted his arm into the air, like a salute. His drowsiness wore off as his deck chair slammed into the bulkhead. A red painted steel hook, snagged in the top loop of the rucksack, dragged him and the chair backwards. Roberts stared up and watched the rope rising to the sky, not to the stars but the overhead pulley.

The lace was thick and tightened around his wrist as the hook got higher, cutting the blood supply to his hand. Roberts wished he'd bought a cheap bag, so that the top loop would rip out, but that wasn't his way. The stitching was strong enough to take his weight, and he rose from the floor. Roberts ascended and tried to jiggle the loop free from the hook. He cleared the bulkhead and dangled in fresh air, his full body weight pulling the loop down into the hook.

Roberts took his knife out of his pocket, using his free hand, and folded out the big blade by biting into the indent with his canine teeth. Easy enough on the ground, but the jolting and swinging meant Roberts nicked his tongue during the process.

Cutting the lace would be easy enough; he'd fall to the deck though, while the bag would continue its ascent towards the winch. The lace bit deep into his wrist; he suspected that it had cut through the skin. Roberts couldn't bend the fingers in his right hand; the blood had drained, and the lace had prevented the return supply.

Roberts cut into the rucksack's loop, but it was tough leather with a steel cord inside. He would not get through it before he reached the winch.

'Let me help you with that,' said the winch operator, who came into view as Roberts's head emerged over the parapet: Andy Teague.

Teague reached out and cut the section of lace between Roberts's hand and the rucksack, and Roberts began his rapid descent. He landed on his feet and rolled; he knocked his shoulder and came up with his right hand numb from the lace.

No sign of Teague. Roberts scanned the line of the gangway which ran under the lifeboat winches, all the way to the steps that joined to the main deck. Teague had no time to get down the steps; he must be still up on the gangway.

Roberts scaled the stairs, using both handrails because the right hand would not close properly. The hook swayed back into position beside its winch.

The stairs provided the only way in or out of the walkway; it was a dead end. Two lifeboats hung from

their hooks to his left; a bulkhead to his right, and upwards only the night sky.

The cover was missing from one lifeboat; the other one appeared secure. Roberts approached the loose tarpaulin, and pulled it back, but then heard a rustle as Teague burst from the other boat. Roberts followed him and got the hook square in the face as Teague swung it at him. A deep cut opened above Roberts's eye and clouded his vision, but through the red tint he spotted Teague land on the bottom step.

Roberts sucked in air and rubbed his hand over his eye. The cut impaired him; blood streamed down his face, making it difficult to see. Roberts took off his shirt, tied it tight over his head and fastened a reef knot over the wound.

Roberts traced Teague's path along the upper walkway, entered a door, and arrived on the main deck. Carpets and upholstery. Fake gold leaf covered the pillars; a dance floor stood empty. Roberts stood on the polished parquet and studied the aisles that fanned off in four directions. The walls and ceiling looked just like the stars; studs of light blinked from them.

Four young men sat in a booth near the dance floor. They drank beer.

'So did you go for a tight brown?' said one of the group.

'No, just an easy pink,' said another one.

They all laughed; the man had told that one before, but it always amused.

Blood dripped through the bandage on Roberts's head, ran down his neck and dripped onto his chest.

The group of lads saw Roberts and stopped laughing. 'That man's fucked.'

Roberts approached them.

'I'm looking for a man, taller than me with scruffy hair. He's got a rucksack with him.'

'Oh yes, that tosser walked down there,' said one of the group and pointed down one aisle.

'No, I think you mean, down that one there, don't you?' said another, pointing the other way.

'Now I understand you're all pissed,' said Roberts, 'And I respect you're minding your own business here and not bothering other people. I'll ask you again; think for a second before you answer this time.' Roberts pulled out his knife, and stabbed it between the fingers of one of the young men, and into the table.

'The man went down there, about a minute before you got here,' said the youth that had given the first directions.

'He did,' they all agreed. Their sombre faces convinced Roberts that it was the truth.

'Thanks.' Roberts stepped off the parquet and onto the carpet.

Windows ran along the left, a wall stood to the right, and a continuous upholstered bench stretched the length of the corridor beneath the windows.

Few people remained this close to the bar. Perhaps those without cabins thought areas away from the bar might be the best bet for sleep. Roberts noticed his neighbour, the woman with a sick husband; she fussed with her kids at one table. The ten-year-old was on her phone, and the little one was asleep on the bench; the mother drank gin.

Andy stood at the end of the corridor, fiddling with the lock on the door to the sun terrace. Andy made eye contact with Roberts.

The slumbering folk on the bench and those crowded around the golden tables watched Roberts on his slow walk. The lady in the small concession, selling perfume, spotted him and winced. Bartenders wearing white shirts and black waistcoats took a break to watch Roberts progress along the red carpet towards Teague.

Two men playing pool stopped as Roberts passed, not because they saw him, but because Roberts took their cue. The pool player turned to complain and thought again.

Roberts cornered Andy; there was no give in the door lock. Roberts took his time; Teague was an amateur, but dangerous. Roberts wouldn't rush him, just in case he got another surprise; the pool cue gave him range.

Roberts held the cue at the tip end with two hands and jolted forward into Andy; he jabbed him in the gut. The blow knocked Andy back against the wall; Andy had Roberts's rucksack over one shoulder, and it cushioned him from the impact against the fish tank behind him.

A steel clip, attached to the sack, caused a crack in the fish tank which emptied its contents on Andy's head, as he slumped on the floor, doubled in pain from the cue to the stomach. A clown fish slid down Andy's chest and landed in the pocket of his shirt.

'I should have killed you back in Sligo,' Roberts said. 'Respect to you though, few men have made me look this bad.'

'What are you going to do with my son?'

'I think he will be OK, if I can get this package across to the UK. They will let him go. But I've got to be honest I don't trust my new boss; I'll do what I can for her though.'

Roberts took the backpack from Andy, picked up the fire extinguisher fixed to the wall next to the fish tank, and threw it through the window onto the sun deck. He used the pool cue to clean off jags of glass around the sides of the open window.

Roberts then picked up Andy in a Fireman's lift, walked up to the side of the ship and threw Andy over the railing of the sun deck, and into the sea.

Andy was not a great swimmer; he'd finished his lessons when he was five and couldn't tread water. He'd spent thousands of pounds on Max and Sam's swimming lessons, and they both put him to shame in the pool.

One thing Andy had learned from the radio, and from the sticker that Max had fitted to his rear windscreen, was that he should resist the urge to swim; that was the easy part. The next instruction: to float, proved not so easy. Andy thrashed for a few minutes before sinking. The last thing he saw before he lost consciousness, was a clown fish swimming away into the Irish sea.

FORTY-ONE

The first thing Andy saw when he regained consciousness was black curly hair; Andy regurgitated water onto the deck of the rib.

'You gave me the shits there mate, my cousin said you were paying well, now I'm not so sure about this,' said the owner of the hair.

Andy took a minute to get his breathing under control. The other man rummaged under a seat up front. The man came back with a towel and a jumpsuit. 'You'd better get dry and get this on.'

The pain in Andy's gut had eased, and he dried himself and put on the jumpsuit. He spotted the ferry about a hundred metres in the distance chugging away from them.

'How did that go for you?' Higgins's cousin (also called Higgins) said.

'Better than expected.' Andy pulled out a clear zip-lock bag from his jacket pocket that lay dripping on the deck. Inside the bag was an egg, about the size of the medium variety at Easter. Next to the egg was a cricket ball. 'Always useful to get a few of these bags from the airport security.'

Higgins took off his lifejacket, which had inflated when he'd jumped into the water to save Andy. Higgins took two deflated jackets, put one on and threw the other to Andy. The rib rocked on the ferry's bow wave.

Higgins sat at the wheel at the rear of the craft. 'We were close to seventy knots all the way from Cork. What do you reckon to the racing props, did you feel the difference?'

'Awesome.' The waves on the open sea from Cork had given Andy far more thrills than the extra top speed. The biggest rush had come from climbing the cable ladder Higgins had launched over the side of the ferry.

'900 horsepower drinks the diesel,' Higgins said. He pointed to the three outboards at the back, each with 300 written on the sides in white lettering. 'We could cruise at twenty knots for an hour to get us in, but we'll get nowhere near Liverpool. I'll try Conwy. You'll struggle to get a ride out of town until morning though.'

'We'll figure that one out when we get there.'

'It seems to have worked for you so far.'

Andy sat on a seat at the back of the boat. He would have chosen the front seats, if Max and Sam were with him, but there was less spray at the wheel end.

Higgins hit the throttle, and the rib glided away. He turned to starboard, and after about ten minutes the coast of Anglesey appeared. The sun peeped over the horizon, and the pinkish light reflected from ripples, as

the rib bobbed through the water. Cargo ships, moored a few miles off the coast, blinked their lights.

‘Waiting for their berth in Liverpool,’ said Higgins.

They passed a little island on the right; it had a cylindrical stone tower with a conical top. Andy saw a black shape bobbing up near the shore of the island but couldn’t make it out. There was sand exposed with seaweed, but it was rocky and looked uninhabited.

Andy turned around to talk to Higgins. ‘Do you know what the tower is?’ Even at twenty knots it was difficult to speak on the rib.

Higgins shouted back, ‘It’s a rescue tower, they used to store food in it for shipwrecked seamen. We should be OK today though, shouldn’t need to use it.’

A few beaches emerged amongst the rocks; the sun reflected golden from the grains. Andy saw the black shape bob again. Not a dolphin.

‘Almost there, another few minutes.’

And then the black shape appeared before Andy, right next to the rib. It swam alongside and then broke the surface. With the sun higher now, Andy could see that the shape was grey, not black. Its face had a few white whiskers. The seal had a little gash above its eye, a wound from stealing fish from fishermen’s lines.

Andy clapped at the seal; it dipped under the surface as if performing for him.

Then another shape approached, orange this time.

'Looks like the inshore lifeboat,' said Higgins. They must have been out on a shout; it's early though, for someone to be in trouble. The orange shape got bigger as it approached them. It stopped in front and blocked their progress. 'Looks like they want to talk to us.'

'A good idea to get ashore. They'd radio you if they wanted to speak.'

'Good point, I'll go past them.' Higgins wore a helmet with a visor. Andy pictured him in the army.

The Irishman pulled the rib to port to get around the orange boat. 'It's not the inshore boat; this one has a roof, and it's too small for the Tamar class; it looks like a lifeboat from the ferry.'

And it was. Roberts steered his craft into the path of the rib; he had nothing like the rib's power at his disposal.

'I've got a feeling I know who's in that boat,' said Andy. 'We don't want to meet him out here.'

'We're on fumes now. I dare not go over twenty knots, or we'll be a sitting duck. I'll try to avoid him as best we can.'

The orange lifeboat rammed into the rib; Roberts was out on the deck. His boat had bounced off after the impact and he was too far away to board them. Roberts returned behind the wheel, ready for another attack.

'We won't make it to Conwy. He'll board us soon.'

‘What about that beach over there?’ Andy pointed to the coast; a length of sand ran along for a mile. Above the dunes, caravans sat on a grassy hill. ‘Could we land there, on the beach?’

The lifeboat rammed them again. Roberts brought it alongside and got out onto the deck ready to board them. Higgins pushed the throttle forward and took the revs halfway; the rib shot away from the lifeboat. When the water flowed over the props at forty knots, Higgins pushed it all the way, up to seventy and left Roberts behind in the lifeboat. The tide was in halfway, and a hundred metres of wet sand flats stretched between the sea and the dunes. The motors cut two seconds before the rib hit the flats and acted as brakes as the rib bumped along for fifty metres before it stopped.

‘I’ll get that sorted for you.’

‘You already bought it, according to my cousin.’

Roberts approached in his slower vessel. Andy jumped down onto the sand and sprinted; the ground was firm, but the sand ripples slowed his progress. Andy stumbled over a rock and twisted his ankle. Higgins pulled him up, and they ran on towards the dunes.

Roberts was out of the lifeboat and onto the flats, in pursuit, about thirty metres behind them. Andy, with the twisted ankle, slowed Higgins down, but the Irishman hauled him forwards.

Roberts reached them as they’d cleared the rocks, on a sandbank in front of the dunes. It would soon be an

island as the tide returned. Andy hit the sand as Roberts's shoulder collided with his thigh. Roberts then used Andy's head as leverage to get himself to his feet. Higgins still wore the helmet from the rib, so Roberts kicked towards his nuts. Higgins dropped two fists down and blocked him; a little faster and Higgins would have caught the leg and put Roberts in trouble.

Andy scrambled up to his knees, grabbed a handful of sand and threw it in Roberts's face. Higgins regained his balance and hit Roberts with a straight right, dispatching him to the ground. While lying on the beach, Roberts kicked his left shin across the front of Higgins, brought his right calf behind Higgins's ankles and locked his feet in a scissor. Roberts then rolled, like a kid tumbling down a hill on his side. There was nowhere for Higgins to go, but down into the sand. Roberts ended the roll on his knees and chopped his hand down into the Irishman's neck.

Roberts turned his attention to Andy, but too late. As Roberts turned, Andy splodged a Jellyfish into the hitman's face. Roberts didn't see much of it, just a hint of red before things went dark. Andy held the back of Roberts's head and rubbed the Jellyfish into his eyes. Roberts's hands clasped his face, and Andy smashed him with a rock.

FORTY-TWO

Failing health compelled Janet to rest.

'You're a superstar,' Amy said. 'Are you OK to get home?'

'I'll be OK and looks like you'll be OK too. I'll see you around.' Janet pulled away in the Fiat.

Rob drove Amy back to the police station; Amy sat in the front seat this time and fizzed with energy.

'Make sure you let him speak during the interview,' Rob said.

Sergeant Thomas operated the custody desk. 'Only one in tonight, we were feeling lonely.' Thomas spoke to Amy. A difference; he would usually speak to Rob and ignore her as though she was an oxygen thief. 'Gave no name when we booked him in and no ID on him. Fingerprint results came back, Josiah Elias Taylor Jnr, arrested twenty years ago. I'll get you some tea, while you wait for his solicitor.' Thomas returned with two mugs and sat on the bench.

Amy hesitated, but then saw he was offering her the tea, and she sat next to Thomas on the bench. Rob and the others watched a video on Tim's phone and laughed.

'Good work tonight Amy, nobody else looked at that CCTV. Mike Baker's been asking me for more bodies, I would send him Jamie, but do you fancy it?'

'Can I get back to you on it Sarge?'

'Sure, you can, talk to Jamie. If he sticks with the job, he's going to the top, the hard way, won't do him any harm to go to another borough though. This one's given him enough already.'

Amy burst with pride.

The door between the custody suite and the station office opened; a man in his late fifties walked in. He wore a blue suit with a white shirt and red tie. He was greying and a little overweight but strode with energy up to the desk, familiar with his surroundings.

'It's a little late for you, and on a Sunday Trevor,' said Thomas. 'We were expecting one of your youngsters.'

'They're all on holiday. Too much time and too much money. You ready for me?'

Thomas went behind the custody desk and beckoned Amy over. 'Go through the initial disclosure please Amy.'

Amy left her tea with Rob and stood in front of Thomas. 'I arrested the suspect for encouraging a robbery, nothing else to disclose.'

The duty solicitor regarded Thomas, 'How am I supposed to give my client a proper defence with no

disclosure?’ His voice sounded strained, he didn’t want his client getting charged, which would result from the now obligatory no comment interview.

Thomas replied, ‘The investigating officer has fulfilled her legal obligations.’

The solicitor walked into the interview room and returned about five minutes later.

‘Ok let’s get this done then.’

Amy prepared the room, started the tape and cautioned Taylor. Rob sat in silence beside Amy.

The solicitor spoke, ‘My client will answer no comment to all your questions, because of insufficient disclosure of the case against him.’

Amy spoke, ‘Please tell me in your own words what you were doing between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Friday 29th June.’

‘No comment,’ Taylor said; he was about forty years old, clean shaven, slim, grey coiffed hair, smart jeans, blue eyes.

‘Did you meet with a man called Jake McGuire on Floral Street, Covent Garden around that time.’

‘No comment.’

‘How do you account for the CCTV evidence of your meeting with Jake McGuire, before McGuire attempted a robbery outside a pub?’

‘No comment.’

'I must remind you that my client will answer no comment to all questions,' said the solicitor.

'Thank you,' said Amy. 'In that case, I'll remind your client, it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Did you give Jake McGuire a piece of paper or a piece of card outside the pub?'

'No comment.'

'Did you know Steven George?'

Taylor paused and looked at Amy for the first time.

'No comment.'

'Did you pay Jake McGuire to steal a bag from Steven George?'

'No comment.'

'How do account for 10, 000 pounds in cash stored in your office at the Theatre?'

Another pause.

'No comment.'

The solicitor interrupted, 'I thought you were questioning my client about a robbery, I don't see what the relevance of your question is, and I'll advise my client not to answer.'

Amy said, 'The relevance of the money is that your client had large sums of cash in his office, which could pay people to commit offences.' Amy looked at Taylor. 'Why

did you have such a large amount of cash in your office? Why did you not give a name when we arrested you?’

‘No comment.’

‘Did you pay a gang to kidnap Steve George?’

The solicitor interrupted again. ‘You said you wished to question my client about encouraging a robbery, you mentioned nothing about a kidnapping. We need to stop this interview right now.’

‘In a minute,’ Amy said. ‘Josiah Taylor, I’m arresting you for the aggravated kidnapping of Steven George. My grounds are, you had the means to pay a gang to do this, CCTV recorded you briefing an offender to steal from Steven George. After the unsuccessful robbery, kidnappers took George from the same location.’ Amy re-read the caution.

‘Don’t answer,’ said the solicitor.

‘No comment,’ said Taylor.

‘I understand that you’d like to speak to your client. We’ll be outside.’ Amy paused the tape and left the interview room with Rob.

‘You’d better chalk another offence up on the board Sarge,’ Rob said to Thomas. ‘Amy’s further arrested him for kidnapping.’

‘Is it time we got CID down here Rob?’

‘Amy’s doing fine Sarge, better than Mike’s boy; I’d let her keep going with this. If this man doesn’t talk soon,

you'll be charging him with kidnapping and he'll be here for an overnight stay.'

The solicitor came out of the room. 'I must insist that you disclose everything.'

Amy looked at Thomas.

'Rob, bring him out,' said Thomas.

Rob obliged and brought Taylor to the desk. 'I'm allowing your detention to gather evidence by questioning, regarding Steven George's kidnapping.' Thomas said. Rob took Taylor back into the interview room, and Amy and the solicitor followed.

'Do you know Bill Rand or anyone from the Ranto company?'

'No comment.'

'Did you pay someone to shoot George?'

Taylor looked at his solicitor.

'No comment.'

'OK. Let's go back outside again.' Rob gestured to the door behind him, and Taylor got up. Back in front of the custody sergeant, Rob took a good hold of Taylor.

Amy went straight into it, 'I'm further arresting you for the murder of Steve George, my grounds are, you've failed to account, when questioned under caution, whether you planned his kidnapping. You have also refused to answer whether you paid someone to shoot him.'

Thomas allowed Taylor's detention, Tim chalked up the new offence on the board. Rob returned Taylor to the cell, leaving the solicitor and Thomas at the desk.

'You're full of surprises,' said the solicitor to Amy.

'I asked the questions as they came. I had no plan, but we are where we are. It's not for me to say, but I'd think we'll charge your client with murder if he doesn't talk soon. Do you want time with him?'

'Yes please.'

Amy felt sorry for the solicitor. He looked old, and she wished he could be back home with his wife, watching TV, or whatever they did on a Sunday night.

'Well, you're on fire tonight Amy,' Thomas said. 'Do you want to call Mike and give him an update?'

'We've been trying all night. They're up North somewhere, lack of signal.'

'Is it OK if Amy and I get food? We'll be upstairs if you need us.'

Thomas nodded and watched Amy and Rob leave through the door into the station. The canteen was upstairs; Amy gave one of her crutches to Rob and grabbed the oak handrail with her right hand; she used the crutch in her left, and cleared the two flights, quicker than Rob. The canteen had a linoleum floor, five square windows in the white-painted brick walls and around ten tables with plastic chairs under them.

Rob glared at the rows of tuna baguettes and cheese rolls in the refrigerated tray.

'Anything hot Debs?' he said to the woman in the hatch.

'We're all done Rob, but you two look like you need more than a cheese roll.' Debs was about seventy years old and spoke with a Glaswegian accent. Amy struggled to understand her most of the time.

'I can get you some bacon on, would you take black pudding?'

Amy picked up a tuna baguette and placed it on the counter. The officers in the custody suite had heard about Amy's leg, and had treated her no different to usual, making a conscious effort.

The sight of Amy on one leg was a shock to poor Debs, and it showed on her face.

'It's OK Debs. I'll be OK.'

'You poor thing.'

Amy's energy drained; she sat down at the table with Rob, and ate the baguette, Debs brought them both steaming mugs of tea. Amy put in two sugars.

They ate in silence. Tim popped his head around the door. 'They're ready for you downstairs.'

Thomas acknowledged them as Amy and Rob returned to the interview room. Taylor sat and didn't speak.

The solicitor said, 'I've spoken to my client, and he's prepared a written statement I intend to read to you.'

After I've read the statement, my client will not answer questions.'

FORTY-THREE

Daily stretching improves body and mind: a gem of advice that Jamie had shared with Amy, but had failed to influence her. Jamie's workouts, in between shifts, always finished with stretching.

He heaved his body to the edge of the bed, jackknifed his legs in the air and rolled so that the bed crashed to the floor. Jamie lay on his side briefly; he could always say he'd had a nightmare if a guard came; it was true.

No one came.

Jamie hooked the top drawer open with his foot, jammed his heel inside and dragged the unit over.

The unit fell onto him, and the contents spilt onto the floor. In the dim light from the clock it was hard to make out the shapes: packs of bandages and plasters for sure, but nothing useful.

And then Jamie saw the handle of the tough cut scissors poking from underneath a cardboard box.

The guards had taken his shoes, and he used his left big toe to drag the scissors over to him. If the guards had tied him around the upper arms, he'd have had no chance, but they had been more worried about his hands.

The scissor tips were ajar. Jamie worked them into the cable tie with his feet and pressed until the plastic gave. The second tie was easy.

Jamie stood and walked into the atrium, and thought he saw stars, through the glass overhead. He entered the room containing Max.

Max's bed had rotated to the prone position. Jamie walked through the door in the screen and sat in the chair next to Max. Taking Max now and getting back to the car was possible but risky; better to let Julia wake Max.

Jamie took the stairs back up to the ground level and hit the green button. The air was colder than yesterday and moist. Jamie tilted his head back and gazed at the roof, which was about twenty metres above him. Louvres had opened to bring in the night air; fans blew the air towards the concrete floor and out towards the server racks.

The lights were dim, and thousands of blue blinks from the machines lit his way. Jamie passed a room full of batteries and another with generators. The ten-minute walk in the cold air helped to clear his head and work the sedative from his system. He arrived at the door to the office. One guard slept on the sofa, and another sat behind the desk, awake and drinking from a Styrofoam cup.

The top of the office block was open to the warehouse; a ledge protruded from the plant room, with a safety rail

across the opening. At the other end, an escape stair rose from the ground.

Jamie crossed to the base of the escape stair and climbed. He reached the third floor and pushed the door which refused to move. Jamie gazed over the expanse of servers below, and then up to the roof rafters, only a few feet above his head. He climbed the safety rail and stared at the steel rafter in front of him.

Jamie had worked as an instructor at a kids camp, in his holidays before the police. One activity involved jumping from a platform fifteen feet in the air, out until they caught a trapeze. An operator adjusted the trapeze according to the height and confidence of the child. Jamie was the only instructor to make the catch at full range.

He jumped; the painted steel bruised his hands as he caught the bottom edge of the rafter.

Jamie saw over the safety rail and onto the plant deck in the half-light. Mike was slumped in the wheelchair. Two men slept in camp beds, and one sat awake in a plastic chair with a rifle across his lap.

Jamie shimmied along the rafter, towards the safety rail. He needed to work his way along a few metres to get around the partition between the escape stair and the main deck. He took one hand off, moved it sideways and then placed it back, in silence, breathing through his nose.

The air was moist; droplets of water settled on his face; he was under one of the open louvres in the roof. The fresh air came in through the grille, a nozzle sprayed the air with water mist and fans propelled the micro cloud down to the floor.

Jamie hung in front of the rail; the guard with the rifle was around ten metres away and would hear him land. Jamie felt safe enough; ten metres gave the man no room to bring the gun to bear.

Jamie pulled his legs into a pike position and then heaved himself back and swung; after three swings, he launched. His foot landed on the rail and sent a clang all the way to the other end. Jamie bounced, landed on the deck and sprinted over to the sentry in the chair.

The guard was slow and only brought his weapon around as Jamie's heel slammed into his upper arm. Jamie took the rifle from the floor; the guard slumped against the wall with his open hands raised.

'Better keep your hands there.'

The man complied.

The other guards rose from their camp beds. Jamie slid backwards along the wall until all three men were in front of him. He checked the rifle: semi-automatic, with a three-round burst if he needed it.

'Keep your hands where I can see them.'

The sleepy men followed the orders.

'Mike,' Jamie said.

No response. Mike didn't move.

'Did you drug him?' Jamie pointed the rifle at the sentry but glanced over at the others.

'No, and I don't think he's dead. He took a good beating though. We let him out so he could go for a piss, and he tried to grab my phone. He's breathing; listen to him.'

'Drag him over here away from you, bring cutters with you.'

The two sleepy guards took the sentry's nod as an order. They pushed Mike over to Jamie and slid over a box cutter.

'Cut him loose and get him out of that chair.'

The guards obliged and put Mike on a vacated camp bed. Jamie heard Mike breathing.

'Now tie him to the chair.' Jamie aimed his gun first at the man busy with the ties and then gestured at the sentry. Jamie searched them and found two handguns.

'Are you all right Mike?'

'Not in great shape.'

'Mike, I could do with help to plan the next move.'

'Get out of here and get help Jamie. I can't stand up right now.'

'No problem, I can carry you to the car. There are only a few guards there.'

Jamie put Mike on his shoulder, in a fireman's lift, and moved towards the emergency stair. Julia stood in the doorway.

'Don't move,' Jamie said. Julia took her chance and ran back down the stairs.

'Sorry Mike,' Jamie dropped Mike onto the bed and sprinted after Julia. She turned into the second floor and ran along the corridor into a dead end.

'You could jump through the window, or you can cuff yourself.' Jamie threw over a set of handcuffs from his jacket pocket.

Julia chose the cuffs rather than the window.

FORTY-FOUR

Saltwater saved Roberts.

White foam lapped the wounds on his brow and stung his temple; Roberts opened his eyes and shivered. The tide had transformed the sandbank into an island; the water was still shallow, but deep enough to drown a man.

Roberts had an irresistible urge to scratch his face; red slime coated his fingers, and as he touched his face his hand stung too. Unable to see, Roberts staggered to his feet. He had experienced concussion before, nausea in his stomach confirmed that the rock had done temporary damage to his brain.

Roberts's immediate priority was to get off the beach. The tide would not wait. The small sandbank had disappeared, and water covered his toes. Through squinted eyes, he made out the shoreline and trudged towards it. The sandbank dipped away, and soon he was waist-deep, then neck-deep, then swimming.

Roberts reached the new shoreline; the swim had washed most of the jelly stings from his face, but he still couldn't open his eyes more than a fraction, and only in bursts. He walked up the dune, and his feet slipped back through the soft sand. Long grass, up to his shoulder,

brushed him on either side as he reached the top.

Another squint through his stinging eyes showed a track through the grass over the dune. Roberts couldn't see the end of the path but knew it would lead somewhere, and that was better than where he stood now. Roberts made his way by touch; he could feel the sand under his feet, and when he strayed off course, the texture would change to harder ground and vegetation. Roberts emerged from the track into a car park.

Weather had eroded the tarmac back to subbase. A few recreational vehicles contained sleeping occupants.

A brick hut stood at the corner of the car park, and Roberts went over to it. It was a toilet block with a metal gate padlocked shut; the campers had their own conveniences.

Roberts wanted to wash his face. He kicked the gate in anger, then recognised the source of it: Teague. Maybe he would kill him and make him suffer. Roberts hated the unprofessional thought.

He peeped again through a tiny slot between his eyelids and made out another building on the other side of the parking area, and a giant tent. Roberts stumbled across the rough surface and banged into a motorbike; its owner was asleep on the beach.

The second building had boards advertising ice cream, chips and pizza.

Roberts kicked the lock, and the wood in the door frame shattered, as the door burst inwards. A serving counter was straight ahead, and a washbasin fixed behind it.

He filled the basin with warm water, took off his shirt and washed his face, his neck, shoulders and arms too; the pain and itching disappeared. Roberts rinsed his face and dabbed a towel near his eyes. His vision was already much better, but the itching returned. Scrabbling around under the washbasin, he found a first aid kit with antihistamine cream and tablets.

Roberts rubbed the cream over his cheeks and under his eyelids, being careful not to get any in his eyes. Better: the placebo effect.

He took out a tub of ice cream from the freezer, mint choc chip. Roberts needed calories, and this would do. He ate the whole container and then downed a pint of water.

With his vision restored, Roberts left the beach café and stood on the dune at the edge of the car park. The rib and his lifeboat were bobbing around, re-floated by the incoming tide. He estimated where the sandbank had been, gazed along the beach line and spotted footsteps in the sand; the footsteps climbed a dune and disappeared as the surface turned to grass and became a track. A yellow arrow on a post pointed toward the footsteps.

Roberts followed the coastal path. He walked, at first looking around for turnoffs that Teague may have taken.

The sea was on his left, and there was nothing but fields to his right. He forced himself into a loping run: up stone steps, through fields, down rocks, across beaches and over bridges, his breath shortening before he reached a grassy headland.

He slowed to a jog and arrived at a beach where a few rowing boats berthed. A rocky island jutted out of the sea a few hundred metres in front of him, and a bigger island was visible miles away.

Roberts climbed the rocks at the end of the beach; the coastal path changed to asphalt as it reached the village.

He walked past a lifeboat station; houses with gardens to his right. He rounded a corner; a few fishing boats bobbed on their moorings in a bay.

Teague and his buddy were in the bay. They shifted a wooden rowing boat from the beach out into the water. They got the boat to the sea, climbed in and rowed.

Roberts saw their destination; a pleasure craft bobbed amongst the little fishing boats. It had only two outboard motors, nothing like the leviathan he'd run aground. It was a decent ride though that would get them to the mainland in an hour. They'd then be close to the fast road into England.

Teague hadn't reached the motorboat yet. Roberts studied a route to the beach; he could have run down the road, but he took the more direct way over the rocks. He crossed a concrete ramp near a crumbling

structure, the old lifeboat station perhaps.

Roberts scrambled over the rocks, jumped down onto seaweed and made his way over the slippery surface; the cliff face shielded him from view. His right hand still felt thick from the lace, and twice he had to steady himself with his forearm instead.

High tide blocked his dry route; the only way would be to swim. A slow breaststroke got him across the first pool, but the cold tightened his ribs. He clambered over an outcrop and dived. He saw Teague and the big man climbing into the powerboat. They pulled out of the bay, through a channel of yellow buoys and out to sea.

Roberts swam to the shore. He searched for any other powerboats but found only kayaks. He sat on the pebbles and picked up a potato shaped stone, not a flat one like he wanted, threw it, and watched the ripples fan out as it sank, with no bounce. Roberts walked around looking for a flat stone and then lay on the pebbles. He slept for twenty minutes.

When he awoke, he found the perfect stone; he kept his hand low to the ground and span it: one bounce, then two, three, four, five; it hit a rock on the sixth bounce, pinged up and hit a tarpaulin out in the bay.

The tarp was close enough to wade out to, and Roberts found a jet ski underneath the fabric. A chord over the handle which Roberts put around his wrist. He jumped on, pressed the red button, plugged in his strap. Nothing. He pushed the red button again, and the motor

revved.

Roberts looked out over to the mainland; the power boat was out of sight, the sun a few degrees higher in the sky. Now he had more horsepower than Teague; he ratcheted up the ski and hit sixty knots. The calm conditions were in his favour. He followed the coast of the mainland, which stretched to his right.

Thirty minutes into the journey, he passed a lighthouse. There was no trace of Teague; Roberts had run parallel with the coast road all the way. Perhaps they'd already got across and ditched the boat. He'd not seen the boat moored up though.

Roberts spotted Teague as he passed the headland, approaching a bay in front of an offshore wind farm; the giant blades were motionless.

Roberts closed in at seventy knots and got between them and the dock wall. The powerboat headed out to sea again towards the turbines. Yellow cylinders rose from the blue water; the white towers above held blade tips one hundred and fifty metres above the sea.

FORTY-FIVE

'He'll be on us soon,' Andy said.

'Nothing I can do,' said Higgins. 'He's got the same power as us with a tenth of the weight.'

They looked back and glimpsed Roberts closing on them, zipping through the turbines in the outer field and into the central channel.

'I need a plan, Andy.'

'We did all right against him two on one last time, but I'd prefer to get away from the water, I'm not a fantastic swimmer.'

'Yeah, I figured that back at the ferry.'

'Pull over to the base of that turbine.'

Higgins cut the throttle, and the powerboat drifted to a stop. He threw a line out and moored them to the yellow turbine base with the speed of a man who had done it before. Andy stumbled out of the boat and climbed the ladder; a steel wire running inside the yellow rungs, used by the maintenance crew.

The wire reminded Andy of climbing courses with Max and Sam on holidays in France: Max shaking at the first platform, then grinning at the last, always frightened

and always climbing anyway. Andy borrowed that courage now and kept his eyes on the next rung.

Max had refused to let Andy help with the final zip wire because help would have ruined the story he wanted to tell at dinner. He had still checked over his shoulder twice to make sure Andy was watching.

There wasn't a harness today. The climb would be easier but any potential mistakes costlier. Andy blocked the noise of the closing jet ski and focused on putting one hand over another. He arrived at a platform and opened a gate to the transition piece of the turbine. Andy looked down and saw the jet ski next to the powerboat; Roberts had jumped into the boat. Higgins climbed the final rung and joined Andy behind the gate; Higgins had a big pack on his back.

'What's that?'

'I'll tell you later, get up to the next platform.'

Andy climbed the next segment faster. At the top of the transition piece, he and Higgins stepped onto a yellow platform at the base of the white tower. Above them, the tower rose like a blank white cliff.

Roberts had started up the ladder; he had a pack on his back too. Andy thought he recognised it from the gear in the powerboat.

The white door into the upper tower opened easily. Inside, a two-person lift waited with its door ajar, running on rails that doubled as a ladder. Andy got in,

and Higgins handed him the huge pack. There was no room for both of them.

A faded inspection tag hung beside the door. The date was old enough to worry Andy and recent enough to make him believe the lift might still move.

‘Change of plan, take this with you, you’ll figure it out when you get to the top. I’ll be in the boat waiting. Trust me.’

Andy trusted him and entered the lift. Higgins rolled down the door and watched the lift start its slow ascent. He then walked back out of the tower door and made it round to the back of the turbine, on the opposite side to the entrance. Higgins listened.

Thirty seconds later, Higgins heard footsteps, and then a pause, and then a clang from inside the tower wall. He stepped back around and closed the door. Higgins lashed it shut with the bungees he’d taken from the power boat.

Roberts looked down from the ladder. He saw the door close and tried to open it, but they’d imprisoned him. There was no way out at the base, so he climbed.

The lift stopped; Andy stepped out onto a spacious, red painted, steel platform. Andy gazed along the coast of Wales, into England; a breeze chilled his cheeks. He stared at Liverpool in the East, the sun hovering over it, and then back to Anglesey in the West.

I’ll be in the boat waiting.

Andy peered over the edge of the rail; Higgins signalled him. Higgins had set the jet ski adrift and was driving the powerboat around the turbine. The Irishman motioned with his hand towards the sea. Did Higgins want him to jump? Andy trusted the man, but not that much.

Andy could not see Roberts in the sea below, which made him think he might have unwelcome company soon. He opened the pack, found a rope, and lashed the exit from the tower shut as best he could.

Andy returned to the pack, and spread the contents onto the deck which included a harness, nylon webbing, a coil of thick yellow rope and multicoloured nylon lines. He pulled out a circular canvas sea-anchor canopy, the kind Higgins used to slow a boat in rough water, and placed it folded on the deck.

He paused for a second, but only a second; a bang on the door from the tower interrupted him. The latch strained against the rope.

Andy stepped into the harness and pulled the webbing tight. He pictured Max beside him before a climb through the trees, waiting for his father to pretend he was not scared.

The latch on the door jerked down, pulling the rope free from the rail; the door opened, but only by a few inches, as the line snagged between the latch and a steel loop fixed to the tower.

Andy clipped the coloured lines into the rings on the webbing, then fixed the yellow rope to the harness. It looked right enough, which was not the same as right.

Roberts took out his knife and cut the latch rope. He joined Andy on the steel deck.

He used the left hand for the knife. The right still obeyed, but only after a delay he no longer trusted.

'Guess I'll take those drugs from your dead body.'

'How's the head?'

The memory of his recent defeat on the beach renewed the anger in Roberts. 'Your big buddy's not around to help this time.'

Andy ran to the safety rail and jumped. Roberts jumped too and landed on the canopy. Andy's weight dragged Roberts all the way to the fence; Roberts sat on the canvas and tied a few of the lines around the barrier post.

Andy hung underneath the platform, suspended by the webbing, connected to the canopy lines. He swung and felt the breeze freshening.

'Give me the drugs, and I'll do my best to help your kid.'

'Come down and get them.'

The yellow rope bumped against Andy's leg. For a second he saw it only as loose line; then the engineer in him caught up with the fear. Rope, winch, moving boat, rising wind. He hauled the coil up, released the fastener

and let it drop exactly where Higgins could take it. The rope streamed below him as the powerboat came round.

Roberts hauled the webbing through the fence and knotted it fast. Andy swung in front of him, trapped on the wrong side of the rail.

And then the nearest turbine started, followed by the next machine along the line. The canopy behind Roberts filled unevenly, not like a parachute and not like a plan, but enough for the freshening wind to drag it over the rail where it rustled above the platform like an oversized child's kite on a short string.

The canopy lines fixed Andy to the platform. He reached for the knots; Roberts kicked his hands away and dragged him towards the rail. Andy's jacket caught on a post. A bolt tore through the pocket and split the plastic pouch. The egg and the cricket ball crushed under Roberts's weight, turning the last hope for Max into powder.

Roberts heaved Andy over by holding his belt.

The turbine speed increased. Roberts took his knife out and pushed it towards Andy's neck.

Andy got both hands around Roberts's wrist and drove the knife down, not at Roberts but at the rope he had been waiting to reach. The blade slid under the loop and cut it clean.

Andy heaved himself upright, still clamped to Roberts's knife arm, then threw his weight over the rail. The wind

did the rest.

The sea-anchor canopy pulled Andy clear of the platform. The lift was wrong and violent, not heroic; the harness bit into his ribs, and for a second he could not breathe. The wind dragged him towards the rotating blades of the next turbine. Roberts watched from the platform.

Andy was just a few feet from the blades.

A sudden wrench spun Andy round. The powerboat surged ahead, the loose rope caught on its winch. Higgins was reeling him in.

Roberts had to brace the flare gun against the rail to keep the barrel steady. His first breath shook; the second did not.

He had only one shot, but the target was big enough and still close enough.

Roberts got lucky. The flare followed a flat trajectory, landed on the canopy and lit the canvas.

Andy saw the fire above him, and so did Higgins, who increased the winch speed; Higgins cut the throttle as Andy hit the water hard enough to empty his lungs and then doubled back and collected him.

‘Can you breathe?’ Higgins said. The joke he had prepared died when he saw Andy’s face.

Andy sat on the bench while Higgins aimed for shore. He tore off the harness with shaking fingers and

checked the slashed pocket. Salt water had washed it clean. Not a single grain of powder remained.

Hope disappeared as Andy slumped on the deck and cried. It was not the plan he mourned, or the lost powder, or even the pain in his own body. It was Max in that hospital bed, waiting for a father who had arrived too late.

Andy pictured Jess trying not to blame him. He pictured Sam asking questions no adult could answer. Nothing would be the same again.

By then, elsewhere, the words were beginning to line up on Amy's desk: PKL, Reflux, Laws, Rand. They did not explain Max yet. They only proved that Andy was no longer chasing one accident.

FORTY-SIX

The solicitor did not start with the story. He pushed four photocopied pages across the table: a theatre invoice, a courier ledger, a custody rota and one sheet from Bob Simpkin's archive. The same three letters appeared on each of them. PKL. Different fonts, different dates, different companies underneath. The letters were the only thing that kept surviving.

Amy did not let him begin. She set the theatre invoice beside the custody rota and lined the dates up with the incident log. The theatre account paid for a courier recovery. The recovery reference matched Bob's Tesla. The custody rota used the same provider prefix as the false FME request. PKL was not one company. It was the piece of paper behind several companies.

Rob leaned over the archive sheet. Bob had written four words in a boxed margin as if they were reminders, not explanations: PKL. ADAM. REFLUX. GENESIS. No definitions. Only arrows, initials and page numbers that led into different folders.

Amy did not give them names yet. She matched the arrows first. PKL appeared on payments and provider cover. ADAM sat beside the Tesla route data. Reflux sat in the dose tables. Genesis appeared only where Laws

had signed or corrected something himself. The labels were not answers. They were drawers being opened in the wrong order.

'Are you ready for this?' the solicitor said.

'No,' Amy said. 'But we are recording, and you are not giving me a story until I know which documents prove which part of it.'

For the first time Taylor looked grateful for procedure. He pointed at the archive sheet rather than the solicitor. 'Bob wrote that. Not me.'

The solicitor tried to read from his handwritten page. Amy stopped him before the second sentence and pushed the photocopies back across the table.

'Document first,' she said. 'Then story.'

Taylor gave a small nod, as if procedure had become the first kindness anyone had offered him. He tapped Bob's archive sheet with one bitten fingernail. 'Start there. Bob wrote the arrows because he knew nobody would believe the names in order.'

The first arrow ran from a university access report to an old protected-contact note. In 1998 Taylor and Bob Simpkin had been arrested for unauthorised access to a computer system. A protected contact intervened. Immunity became work. The work began as neural-response simulation, dressed as rehabilitation support because rehabilitation sounded harmless and attracted cleaner money.

Amy marked the first column origin and the second evidence. Rob marked dates. Taylor stared at the table while old favours acquired dead people's names.

'My client also recruited Dr Julia Matthews,' the solicitor said.

Amy lifted a hand. 'Which document proves that?'

Taylor slid a faded consultancy agreement from the pile. The signature line carried Matthews' name. The approval box beside it carried one initial and one surname: P. Laws. 'That is where it changed,' Taylor said. 'When Laws took over, the language changed faster than the science.'

'Changed how?' Amy asked.

'ADAM stopped being sold as support and became prediction. Not where a vehicle goes. How a person reacts when frightened, delayed or forced to choose. Bob kept saying the model was only dangerous because people think procedure is neutral.'

Jamie had said almost the same thing in the garage without knowing the history. Confirm was not neutral. Amy wrote ADAM beside the Tesla photographs and drew an arrow to the line Jamie had captured on the screen: SUBJECT RESPONSE CONFIDENCE - UNSTABLE.

The solicitor turned another page. Amy made him wait until Rob had found the matching dose table.

'One week ago, Dr Matthews contacted my client,' the solicitor said. 'She said the work had crossed a line.'

'What line?' Rob asked.

Taylor rubbed both hands over his face. 'The clean version? Prime the brain, stimulate it, record the response, then pretend the response is the person. ADAM predicted the answer. Reflux dragged the body back if the chemistry held. Genesis was Laws deciding the sale mattered more than the person underneath.'

The room went quiet. Stripped of its names, the work became less extraordinary and more obscene: custody records, courier logs, a boy on a table, Max under hospital lights and Jamie's voice disappearing under concrete.

Amy drew four boxes instead of writing a sentence. She put one document under each box and left room beneath them for names.

'Now the bag,' she said.

'Simpkin asked my client to recover Reflux,' the solicitor said. 'Patrick Laws supplied a photograph of Steven George. My client paid Jake McGuire to take the bag before Rand's people realised the courier had lost control of it. It was meant to look dull. Bike, bag, gone.'

Amy put the manual tag photograph next to the courier ledger. The same eight-character reference sat in both places. The street robbery was no longer an opening incident. It was the first failed recovery attempt they

could prove.

'When the robbery failed, Simpkin panicked and called Rand and Laws,' the solicitor continued. 'After Simpkin died, my client removed equipment from the theatre office. Emails, accounts, trial records, courier logs. Enough to link Laws, Simpkin, Rand and PKL without asking you to take his word for it. He will cooperate. He wants protection.'

'Protection from Laws?' Amy said.

Taylor looked at the door before he answered. 'From anyone still calling this a project.'

'How did you know Jake McGuire?' Amy said.

'Jake was my dealer,' said Taylor.

'I'd recommend you not to say anything else,' said the solicitor.

'Ask away,' said Taylor. 'I'll answer your questions.'
There was the trace of an American accent.

'What evidence do you have of the British government's involvement in the crimes you mention?'

'Not the whole government. A protected corner, or men pretending to be one. They recruited Bob and me, then used my father's money and PKL's infrastructure to hide the work. I have twenty years of emails between Laws and Simpkin. Money, deaths, signatures. Enough.'

'Why was Simpkin killed?'

'Bob was holding back the last piece they needed. He wanted more money. Laws decided it was cheaper to remove him.'

Taylor wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'That was how Laws thought. Not right or wrong. Cheaper, cleaner, easier to route.'

'You and Bob Simpkin were partners?'

'Since university.'

'Do you know what he was holding from them?'

'I'm not sure, he'd hidden it in his car; I sent you that way hoping you'd find something and get involved.'

'That's very generous of you,' Rob said.

A knock on the door.

Amy stopped the recording and left the interview room. Thomas stood outside and asked, 'Have you ordered a doctor for him?'

'No, there was no reason to, he's fine.'

'The front desk called through to say there's an FME in reception to see a prisoner, and Taylor's our only prisoner.'

'Who's on the front desk, are they still on the phone?'

'Yes, it's Becky.'

Amy tore the first page from the printer and wrote the time across the top before anyone could tidy it into a file. Jake had died after a green tick told them to stop

looking. This time she circled the tick, the callback number and the provider prefix in black biro. 'I want the callback completed, not attempted,' she said. 'And I want a live face on the front-desk camera, not a logo, not a provider note, not a tick.'

'Close enough is not a check,' Amy said. 'Close enough is how he got in last time.'

Becky walked back through the doors behind the front desk but didn't unlock the door connecting the station office to the main corridor.

Green eyes saw her running down the corridor, through the mesh reinforced glass in the door. Becky punched in a code and entered the custody suite.

'Anyone in the station office?' Thomas said to Becky.

'No, he was the only one in there, I was about to lock the doors.'

Rob joined them along with Frank and Tim, and they convened an emergency meeting while the printer stuttered behind the desk. The request carried the same kind of pre-cleared provider reference as Roberts had used, but the callback number differed by one digit from the custody rota record. Rob pulled the shutter down over the cage entrance from the yard.

'Rob, get everyone into cell one as quick as you can,' Thomas said, and then used the phone on the desk. 'I need firearms, Tactical support group, London Ambulance Service and Fire Brigade down here now.'

Rob glanced at Thomas and raised his eyebrows as he escorted Taylor and the bedraggled solicitor from the interview room and into cell one. Taylor took the keys from Tim and ushered him into the room along with Amy, Rob and Frank. 'Stand next to the benches out of the line of the door slot,' Thomas said.

A face appeared in the door mesh between the station office corridor and the custody suite. Green eyes peered at Thomas and fired three rounds into the door lock; splints of wood exploded like darts. Thomas jumped into cell one, with the bunch of keys in his hand, and slammed the door shut.

'Good guess on the firearms,' Rob said.

'Let's hope help gets here in a hurry. The door is steel and two inches thick, and the walls are two feet of reinforced concrete, so we've got time.'

The group heard gunfire outside, against the steel roller door; then they heard an explosion.

'Christ,' Rob said. 'Sounds like the army has arrived.'

Footsteps tapped like a machine gun firing. Three or four men at least. The steps got closer and stopped.

Thomas pushed Taylor into the wall next to the door, out of view of the hatch; the flap on cell one lowered.

The cell door rattled as bullets bounced off it, and the occupants covered their ears as the room vibrated like a speaker.

‘Send out Taylor, and that’ll be the end,’ said Green eyes.

‘What about my prisoner’s welfare? I’m not a fan of writing, so we’ll stay here a while.’ Thomas said.

There was no direct shot through the flap, so Green eyes fired a round into the bottom left corner of the cell. The ricochet, off the steel reinforcement in the concrete wall cover, was deafening.

‘Anyone plays squash?’ Green eyes said through the hatch.

‘I’m a little heavy these days,’ Rob said. ‘I’ll give you a game though if you’re up for it.’

‘How’s this for a game, I keep firing until I get a round against the front wall, or maybe it will hit bone first, either way, I get the point. The first to eleven points wins. 1-0 to you so far. You can open the door if you’d like to stop playing but, in that case, I win.’

Green eyes let another round loose but adjusted his aim. Not an exact science and a waste of time because of the randomness. Green eyes liked to play games though; he always had a ball in his hands. The second bullet lodged in the concrete.

‘2-0 to you, well done. Now I’d love to spend more time with you, but I’m on a deadline here. You’ve got an advantage; the area of the cell walls is big, and you’re all crowding in a tiny space.’

'Don't be a sore loser,' said Rob. 'If you don't know how to lose then you'll never win.'

Green eyes laughed. Thomas didn't laugh, but stared at Rob.

'I've introduced a new rule, a higher-powered weapon; I should get more ricochets that way.' Green eyes took a rifle from his masked colleague and fired at the back wall again.

Six ricochets, in the world's worst pinball game.

'Shit,' Rob said, as he looked down at his calf where the bullet lodged.

'2-1,' said Green eyes. A tear gas canister exploded in the corner and filled the cell with a noxious odour. 'One more round in the dark for you, and then I'll throw in a grenade.'

The next bullet fizzed around the room. Was that more gunfire outside the cell? Amy rubbed her eyes which streamed with tears.

'Hello in there, we're C019.'

Thomas said, 'Thank god you were nearby.'

'We've got three dead men out here, are you OK?'

'I've got a scratch, but everyone's OK,' said Rob.

'We're not bothered about you Rob. You must have pissed these men off; did you not give them breakfast or something?'

'We'd love to chat, but we've got CS gas in here and it's the strong stuff,' Thomas said, and threw the keys through the hatch.

The door opened. Becky felt a twinge of guilt as she stepped over the body, and she saw the dead green eyes staring at her from the floor.

FORTY-SEVEN

'What are you going to do with me?' Julia said.

'You're under arrest, I need to get you out of here to a police station, and get you charged,' Jamie said.

'I love the way you're so precise.'

'I need to take care of the two guards in reception, and then I'll be back for you.' Jamie unclipped a key from his belt and released one of Julia's hands from the cuffs. Jamie fastened her to a radiator pipe. Not the best restraint, but it would do for the few minutes he needed to deal with Mackey and the other man asleep in reception.

It took Jamie less than a few minutes as someone had done the job for him. Mackey was face down on the reception desk, and his broken wrist a minor injury compared to the gaping slot in his throat. Mackey had bled over the entire carpet of the reception, and his dead buddy on the sofa had also donated.

Two soldiers patrolled the data floor, visible through the reception door. The soldiers wore helmets, black body armour and held rifles. Jamie returned to Julia, who had wrenched the radiator from the wall, and was about to loop the handcuff over the copper pipe.

'I can't leave you for a minute.' Jamie fastened her hands behind her back and gripped the centre of the cuffs. 'Come with me if you want to live.'

Jamie dragged Julia back up the stairs to the plant room and put his hands over his lips. 'Look down there.'

Julia peered through the rail and saw about eight soldiers. Jamie beckoned her back into an electrical cupboard and closed the door. Not the best acoustic protection but the door was thick enough.

'What are they doing?'

'Someone is here to take back control of the project,' Julia said. 'Laws not checking in must have triggered a tripwire. They won't kill me, not before the work is running again anyway.'

'That's OK then; I'm not sure they'll feel the same way about the rest of us. Who are they?'

'Soldiers I guess, with orders.'

'So, I'll let them know I'm police, and we're on the same side?'

'No. Some of them will be private security, some ex-military, some men Rand keeps through shell contracts. The paperwork will call it asset protection or technical recovery. That is the point of paperwork.'

'Was the journalist called Steven George?'

'Yes, he was. If you get these cuffs off, I'll help you.'

'I don't trust you.'

'I could scream, and they'll find us, they'll shoot you and everyone else here and then put me to work until my friend arrives.'

'Or?'

'Release me, and I'll play along a while.'

Jamie was silent for an uncomfortable amount of time while he ran scenarios in his head and calculated probabilities. Jamie had found the silences useful while interviewing prisoners. Amy's technique was better though: Amy would chat to the prisoners, almost make friends with them and elicit far more information than he ever did.

'OK,' Jamie undid the cuffs.

Julia brushed her breasts past him on the way out of the electrical cupboard; it was a tight squeeze. 'Follow me,' she said.

Julia and Jamie walked along an aerial walkway, passing under the rafters and cooling ducts. Julia took off her shoes and signalled to Jamie to do the same. It was a good idea, and they glided along until they were about halfway along the building. Julia exited the walkway, and they took the steps down to the ground floor; racks of blue blinking lights shielded them from the patrolling soldiers. The sign on the door in front of them had the words: 'Fibre Vault.'

Jamie stopped beside the fibre cabinet before Julia touched the screen. 'Plain English first. What was Max

doing?'

Julia looked towards the monitor. 'Unplugged?'

'Not the system. Max.'

The nearest monitor showed connections that should have been dead: maintenance VPN, hospital switchboard, traffic metadata, mobile-location gateway. Beside each one sat the same expired service account, still accepted somewhere downstream. The time stamps came in bursts rather than lines, as if something had been trying doors until one opened.

Jamie pointed to the service account and then to the date beside it. 'This was meant to be closed.'

'It was meant to be forgotten,' Julia said. 'That is not the same thing. Laws called external interaction Exodus. It was phase two, two months from now. Reflux opened the bridge, but ADAM kept finding old doors.' She watched the failures flicker and corrected herself. 'No. Max kept finding old doors.'

She brought up a list of failed connections. One number pulsed among them. Jamie stared at the last three digits: 999. He had written them into his notebook on Friday night, beneath Andy's statement.

'Andy's mobile,' Jamie said. 'Max wasn't searching the internet. He was trying to find his father.'

'We closed the firewall. At around 7.00 p.m. the traffic surged again through maintenance credentials, old passwords and a network segment nobody had admitted

was still connected.'

'How did he get out again?'

Julia nodded towards the screen rather than answering at once. Hospital switchboard. Traffic cameras. Mobile-location services. Public broadcast metadata from the World Cup final. Ordinary feeds. Ordinary gaps.

'He was not watching football for fun,' Julia said. 'He was narrowing the world until he found the one number he knew.'

Jamie thought of Andy's statement on Friday night: the pub table, the unfinished question, the mobile number written neatly because boring details mattered. A boy who could not move had still chosen where to look.

'I thought you didn't map the emotional part of the brain?'

'We didn't, and we never intended to keep external lines open while Max was still connected to his physical brain.' Julia lowered her voice as boots rang somewhere beyond the plant room. 'We can taper him off slowly or tear him away cold. One risks changing him. The other could kill him.'

'So why are we here?'

'This isn't just a vault for fibre. I've kept something else locked up in here.'

Julia moved over to a cabinet on the wall and opened it with a key; it contained switches and a few dials. At the bottom of the cupboard, a box sat on the shelf with a label fixed to it. The label showed the word: 'Adam.' Jamie recognised the box from the Tesla in the car park on Friday evening.

'The reason my employers are not happy,' Julia said. Jamie waited. She tried again, less cleanly. 'Adam Grimshaw was the brightest man in my class at university. We met at the freshers' ball. He played rugby, drank too much and treated risk like proof that he was alive. Bob Simpkin had built a virtual-reality interface that could connect with a damaged brain. Adam wanted a go. I warned him not to, but warning Adam was often another way of daring him.'

'Someone pulled the plug on him?'

'A police raid, and Adam died. Simpkin had not saved him, not in the way grieving people want saving. He had recorded fragments: motor responses, speech patterns, fear responses, preferences.' Julia touched the box and then took her hand away. 'I told myself I wanted to test what remained. Some days I admitted I wanted to speak to him.'

'I've never been into computer games. My Dad kept me from them; he knew best.'

'When Simpkin realised what I wanted to do with Adam's fragments, he spoke to Laws and raised the price. I refused to launch unless Laws paid for the box

and the records. Laws had Simpkin killed, recovered Adam, and kept pushing for the handover documents. He did not want a cure. He wanted a platform clean enough to sell and dirty enough to own.'

'Now what?'

'I will let Adam's model steady the response long enough to bring Max down,' Julia said. 'Then I cut the bridge.'

'Any danger to Max?'

'It should not alter Max's body directly, but the system is already using him as live feedback. Adam is not alive in the box. Max is not alive in the computer. Not resurrection. Contamination.' Julia looked at Jamie then, no technical words left to hide behind. 'A model is not a son. I forgot that once. Laws never believed it in the first place.'

The fibre vault sat above the medical centre like a maintenance loft for the whole building. From it, a narrow service stair dropped past the light well, crossed a short plant corridor and ended at the white room behind the basement gatehouse. Julia led Jamie down that route now, through the maze and into the room: in the dawn light it was more pink than white. The atrium glowed through the cylinder above them. It reminded Jamie of his sister's bedroom in Hong Kong when they were kids.

Jamie followed Julia through into the room where Max lay on the table, still flat on his back. Jamie wondered

what time the system clock would decide it was time for Max's morning run. Julia opened a glass panel on a control board near to the bed and inserted the black box into the hole.

Julia's hand went to the black box first. She saw Jamie notice, then laid her palm on Max's forearm instead. 'Patient,' she said, almost to herself, and only then reached back for the slot.

Julia pulled the panel down and pressed a green button.

Silence.

And then the noise of boots on steps.

'They're too late,' Julia said; soldiers burst into the room and grabbed her. The soldiers forced her to the floor and held Jamie next to her.

Jamie twisted his neck round to look at his captors. About four soldiers in the room. Jamie planned his next move, but he stopped planning as a rifle butt smashed into his temple.

FORTY-EIGHT

Waves lapped the base of the tower. Roberts watched the little boat pull away, with Teague weeping at the bow.

Roberts felt momentary guilt; he'd killed the man's son he guessed. The guilt disappeared as it always did. If Teague had just handed over the goods, then the kid would have been OK. The boat shrank; it headed towards a bay with a sandy beach.

Roberts couldn't budge the locked door at the tower's base, so he emptied the canopy bag on the upper platform and pulled out a spare coil of rope. Roberts fastened it to the safety rail with a rolling hitch on the opposite side of the platform to the turbine blades. The wind buffeted him as he threw the coil over the fence; it stopped a few metres short of the yellow platform below him.

Roberts climbed over the rail and grabbed the rope. He looped it around his right leg and fed it through his hands. The tower sheltered him from the wind. Every ten metres he stood on the rope with his free foot and took a break. The torn wrist opened again before he reached the platform. Roberts took a few minutes to descend the line, not a record. He jumped and landed on

the yellow platform, descended two ladders and swam to the beach.

By the final ladder his grip no longer closed cleanly. He had to hook the damaged hand over the rung and pull with his elbow, an ugly movement that would have irritated him if it had not worked.

The swim steadied him without refreshing him. A man walking a dog eyed him as he rose from the water onto the sandy beach in the bay; Roberts saluted, and the man looked away.

Roberts considered getting a car to Liverpool and then a flight out of the UK. Airports would be watched, but patience usually solved that. First, he wanted Julia. She knew too much, which made her dangerous, and he wanted her anyway. Roberts disliked the order of those reasons.

Roberts walked to the end of the beach, dashed up a ramp, and around a watersports place; he arrived on the promenade. A railway line ran between him and the coast road. Roberts didn't fancy walking across the railway line and followed it, walking next to the rails until it took a right turn over a bridge. The coast road ran along to his right, and the beach extended on his left. He climbed a wall more slowly than he wanted and descended a grass bank to the shoulder of the coast road.

It was a dual carriageway with a fifty limit. Not the best spot for hitching, but on the plus side, a hard shoulder

ran parallel with the road and offered a spot to stand; he was visible half a mile away.

The trucks and cars left him standing there for thirty minutes; Roberts was almost dry; the temperature pushed twenty degrees at 7.00 A.M.

A car slowed and pulled into the shoulder, and Roberts walked up the bank in case there was an issue with the brakes. The car sped up towards him and then braked and stopped a metre away. There was no skid, but it was on the limit.

Teague got out.

'The automatic braking saved you there; I was trying to hit you. You want to kill me? Come on then; I'll hurt you.'

Roberts didn't doubt it. Teague was a massive man. six feet three inches at least, and heavy, with wild eyes and pupils like laser pointers; there was no thinking behind the eyes, just a primal instinct to kill. Teague had injured Roberts, and although confident he'd dispatch Teague, Roberts wasn't being paid to take more damage.

'Do you want to know where your son is?'

The question dragged Andy out of rage and into thought. His shoulders dropped. His breathing slowed. A few metres still separated them.

'At a building owned by PKL. I'll try them all and burn each one.'

'You've still got a family.'

Andy thought of Jess and Sam, and anger changed to despair. Killing Roberts would be easy compared with climbing back into the car beside him. That was the part Andy hated: needing the man he wanted to break.

'Do you want me to take you to him?'

'Why would you do that?'

'Simple, I need a lift, and that's where I'm going.'

'Why would I trust you?'

'Your call, I could kill you and take the car, but you'd damage me, like you say, so why bother. Where did you get it from?'

'The car rental place in town Dickhead, no need to steal vehicles or hitch.'

'You drive the car.'

'Get in the passenger seat.'

Andy pulled back onto the A55 and headed East past Chester. The journey took around three hours; they got held up a few times in the Monday morning rush hour. The first hour of the trip was silent; both men listened and watched each other in their peripheral vision. Andy felt safe driving; unless Roberts had suicidal tendencies, Andy had a good chance of completing the journey, as far as PKL anyway.

Roberts was nervous; Teague was on edge. Roberts prepared to knock the gear stick into neutral if his

driver swerved.

His torn wrist throbbed against his lap. He kept the hand still because movement would show Teague how much of the earlier damage had followed him inland.

Andy was a smooth driver though, competent on the motorways; the rental glided along the road.

Andy spoke first.

'So why are you going back?'

The directness of the question surprised Roberts, but he answered anyway. 'A woman.' Silence again for half an hour. Roberts spoke next, 'What happened to the big Irish fellow?'

'He's on his way back to Anglesey, to salvage his rib; Higgins got paid well; he's happy enough. Have you heard of Steve George?'

Roberts had to think; Laws had offered him the hit on George on Saturday morning, while he was in Julia's office, at PKL.

'Friend of yours?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't kill him; it was a man called Deakin; I understand the police killed Deakin in a raid at a college.'

'Why was Steve killed?'

'Deakin's not cheap, so your friend must have known something that would hurt someone powerful, what did he do?'

'Steve was a journalist, based over in the States. He met Jackson at the Tichi factory and ended up carrying the trail Laws needed buried: Tichi chemistry, Simpkin's evidence and the Reflux transfer.'

'If he was getting into this, then you've answered your question. We'll both be on the list now. Get whatever family you've got, get on a plane, go on holiday and don't come back is my advice.' Roberts knew the error in his words as they left his mouth; he sensed Andy's thoughts returning to Max. But Andy contained it.

'Who's list?'

'An off-books unit. Civil service when it needs paper, intelligence when it needs silence, military when it needs uniforms, contractors when it needs deniability. Twenty years ago Laws found a project worth hiding and built a moat around it.'

'The girl lost her leg you know, the police officer you hit on the crossing.'

'She got what she got, nothing personal,'

'Her boyfriend killed Deakin, that wasn't personal. It might be if he meets you though.'

Thoughts of the boyfriend did not concern Roberts, he'd not met law enforcement yet that troubled him.

Silence for the rest of the journey. It was around 10.00 A.M. When they arrived at PKL. The front gate lay on the ground, and a police car, a Ranto van and two military vehicles parked up in the yard.

Andy stopped by the gate. 'You got a plan,' he said.

'Go in, find Julia, get out. What's your plan?'

'No plan.'

'Might as well come with me then. Julia might be with your son.'

Roberts and Andy left the vehicle outside the gate and walked towards the building; not the most welcoming reception area that Andy had ever visited. Through the glass in the door, they saw a soldier patrolling.

The building resolved itself into five places Andy could hold in his head: the broken front gate, the reception shell, the cube that guarded the basement stairs, the fibre vault with its labelled feeds, and somewhere below them Max's room. Anything beyond that was noise.

'Stand outside,' Roberts said. 'Make sure you're visible in the door but get ready to duck around the corner if he raises his weapon.'

Roberts tapped on the glass and stood back out of sight. Andy waved from the front entrance; the soldier burst through the door from the warehouse and raised his weapon at Andy. Roberts plunged his knife into the soldier's neck and then stripped him of his webbing and his rifle. Roberts gave Andy a sidearm and showed him

how to use it.

‘Was that a British soldier you killed?’

‘The man still might have got called to a war zone to fight for your country, but there’s no parliamentary approval for his current unit; it’s off the books, so I’m inclined to say no, he wasn’t working for Britain. Does it matter?’

Roberts headed through the door and recalled the drawings from Laws’s office; he used the mental map to navigate to the centre of the building. Fans buzzed above them; the air was crisp. Two more sentries outside the cube that acted as a gatehouse to the basement. Andy saw a room labelled: ‘Fibre Vault.’

The cube blocked the direct route down. The fibre vault sat to its right, separated from the basement by one locked stair and a wall full of labelled feeds: air, spray, camera, alarm, reset. Andy understood the layout in the blunt way engineers understand buildings under pressure. If the cube was the door, the vault was the hinge.

He tried the first service reader on the left and the light stayed red. Once, that would have irritated him only as information. Now he hit it again before he caught himself. His wrist throbbed where the lace had cut it open, and the rejected swipe had cost him six useless seconds.

Roberts preferred the stairs as a method of descent into the basement. With enough ammo, they could pick off

an army coming up at them one at a time. First though, he had to deal with the sentries. Roberts beckoned Andy into the Fibre Vault so he could speak. Andy looked around the room and noticed the disconnected cables running from the wall into the cabinet.

‘I could take one sentry out, but that will spook the other man. I need you to take him,’ Roberts said.

Andy didn’t look overjoyed by the prospect.

‘Those men are standing between you and your kid. The man at the reception would have shot you. I’m the one on your side right now.’

Andy nodded. ‘OK.’

Roberts pulled out the combat knife he’d taken from the soldier and gave it to Andy. ‘You use this one; it’s much better. I’ll make do with my pocket knife. We can’t use the guns, or the whole squad will be on us.’ Andy took the vicious weapon.

‘How are we going to get to those men? They’ll see us coming.’ Andy stared at the loose cables above the rack. The labels were old, but the logic was familiar: feed, return, alarm, override. Bob Simpkin had hidden his secrets in systems; men like Bob always left a way back in. ‘Hold on. I’ve got another idea.’

FORTY-NINE

The cable clicked into the cabinet. A green light flickered, then held steady.

The labels were not written for heroes. They were written for maintenance: RETURN AIR, ROOF LOUVRE, SPRAY ISOLATE, MANUAL RESET. Bob had trusted boring names because boring names survived panic. Andy followed them as if they were rungs on a ladder.

Andy used to unplug the router and lock it in the boot when Max would not come off his games. Back then, it had felt like parenting. Now the same logic appeared on the labels: cut the wrong link and people panicked towards the answer waiting for them.

'What did you just do?' Roberts said.

'If Bob built the safety system, he'd have built it for himself first. We wait.'

Roberts noticed that Andy looked composed for the first time, not calm exactly, but useful.

Five minutes later, a red light blinked on the CCTV camera above them. The building hum died. Roberts opened the door a fraction. The fans had stopped, the louvres were open, and water sprays under the grilles formed clouds that drifted down through the blue lights.

The ceiling lights vanished first, then the middle rows. Soldiers stared upwards and held their posts. After thirty minutes, the fog had swallowed the building. Visibility was a foot in front of the face.

Roberts turned back to Andy. Teague had not moved in half an hour. He sat on the desk, saving energy, watching the labels instead of the door. Roberts had expected grief to make him noisy or useless. The man was a surprise.

'I guess we're ready,' Roberts said. 'Not sure how you did that but is that what you hoped would happen?'

Andy rose. 'Over to you.'

'Follow the white line and stay close.' Roberts took the combat knife from Andy. 'I'll deal with resistance.' He opened the door and crawled low enough to keep the line in view. His wounded side dragged against the frame and a flash of pain made him misjudge the first corner. He paused, counted three breaths, found the white line again and moved. He remembered the guard near the stairwell, found a shoulder in the fog, clamped a hand over the soldier's mouth and finished him with the knife.

He had stopped improving the plan. Now he was only selecting which failure bought him another minute.

As Roberts and Andy crept down the stairs, the fog thinned unexpectedly around a service light. Roberts froze until it thickened again, furious at the building for changing its own rules. Then he killed the soldier in the

underground atrium.

Max lay on a bed with a silver helmet on his head. Julia sat at a desk next to him typing on a keyboard. Her hands moved with practised speed, but her face had lost the certainty Roberts remembered. Beside the keyboard was a handwritten sequence of contingencies, each one crossed out except the last: GIVE THE FATHER A CHOICE.

Julia turned. 'Did you get the Reflux?' she said to Roberts.

'It's destroyed,' said Andy.

'Then I can't bring your son out by procedure,' Julia said. Andy stared at her until she stopped sounding like a doctor talking to a file. She looked at Max before she looked back at him. 'Reflux was the bridge back to the body: stabilise the brain, taper the stimulation, let the living pattern reassert itself. Without it, the machine can hold him near the surface, but it cannot make him choose.'

'Can we get more?'

'We can't, it would take months to get a new batch.'

Roberts saw the tension return to Andy's neck and the colour rise in his face. Julia's bedside manner was dire, but she did not retreat. Teague had a sidearm in his pocket and grief in his hands. She pushed a printed trace towards him as if giving evidence.

'That's unusual,' Julia said. 'Max is sensing the real world again: sound, smell, pressure. ADAM is in the trace, but Max is the living anchor.' Andy looked at her. 'Say it without the company words.' Julia swallowed. 'The model can predict him. It cannot love for him. Talk to him. Not like a patient. Like your son. If the red light under that panel flashes, close it properly and keep talking.'

Andy looked from the printed trace to Max's face. 'So if he answers me, I'm not talking to a machine?' Julia did not make the answer kind. 'If he comes back, it has to be Max.'

'Max can hear us?' Andy said.

Andy stepped to the glass. Every professional route had narrowed to this: no clean drug, no safe procedure, no senior doctor arriving in time. He had spent the weekend photographing labels and waiting for systems to catch up. Now the only thing left that belonged to him was his son's name.

'Julia, we've got to get out of here,' Roberts said. He reached for her arm, but she shook him off long enough to lock the keyboard and wipe a drive from the dock beside it. 'I'm not leaving him with Laws's notes,' she said. Only then did she move. Roberts wasn't waiting; Julia was dead without him, but she would not leave as luggage.

'Max, wake up, I'm right here. All you've got to do is wake.' Andy shook Max by the shoulder. Max breathed

more rapidly. His eyelids flickered. Andy watched the line charts and numbers on the screens. They were meaningless, so he chose something that was not.

‘Wind the bobbin up, wind the bobbin up, clap, clap, clap.’

The charts changed. A spike in the trace at the clap, clap, clap, and then it continued with the same pattern. Max could hear him. Andy sang again. More spikes in the chart, a little sharper, more pronounced.

The screen had an internet browser icon on the bottom left. Andy opened football news and read transfer rumours from after the World Cup. Nothing changed. He closed the browser and looked back at Max.

Andy returned to the song. The chart showed Max was listening, but his eyes remained shut. Andy talked about the first time Max had refused to pass in a rugby drill because he thought scoring made him braver. Andy had made him run the drill again until Max passed, sulked, then laughed when Sam copied him in the garden and fell over the dog. It was not an important memory. That was why Andy trusted it. Spikes appeared in the trace, sharper than before.

Andy tried to phone Jess, but there was no signal. He logged into his online email from the computer’s browser and emailed Jess and Mike Baker with his location.

Then Max spoke.

'Hi, Dad.' The voice was artificial, from a speaker somewhere in the control panel. 'You can go now; I'm glad you're safe. Did I help?'

'You did great Max; you saved me. I wouldn't be here without you. I wouldn't be anything without you. Wake up, please.'

'I am awake Dad.'

The synthesised voice's statement did not match the picture Andy saw; Max had his eyelids closed and looked a little paler. The heart rate monitor on the equipment became irregular.

'I can see routes, Dad. Cameras. Doors. Signals. Too many signals. The body is slow and noisy. It hurts.'

'How can I join you, Max?'

'The body that created me is failing. If you put on the helmet, the system can map you too. It can compare us. It can keep the pattern stable. I do not want to go back to the pain.'

'What about your Mum, Max?'

'Love is chemistry and repetition. The machine can repeat. It can measure. It can make the fear quieter.'

'But it cannot be your mum, Max. It cannot be Sam. It cannot be a muddy rugby pitch or a fight over the remote or the way your room smells after training. It can only flatten those things until they stop hurting.'

The room seemed to hold its breath.

A pause. The trace flickered, not like a god considering the universe, but like a boy fighting static.

The heart trace became weaker. Max's lips turned blue.

Andy stopped and tried a new tack.

'Don't you miss sports, Max?'

'The model predicts the pass before the player moves. It does not need a team. Passing reduces individual control.'

Andy would not win a logical argument with whatever the machine had made from Max and Adam and fear. The model knew the pass. It did not know the sulk afterwards, Sam falling over the dog, or Max laughing though he had sworn he was not laughing. Andy needed the boy who hated losing and loved playing anyway. Then he noticed the glass panel Julia had warned him about. It was loose. The red light blinked below it. Andy pressed the panel shut and kept talking.

The red light stopped blinking.

'Max.'

No response.

The heart monitor showed a flatline.

'Max.'

Still no response. Andy hugged Max and wept. Cheek to cheek, tears spilt down onto the pillow beneath Max's head.

Through the tears, Andy saw the light under the glass blink green. Was that a faint breath from Max? The cursor on the heart chart moved.

Max inhaled; the trace grew stronger. Max opened his eyes. The helmet retracted from his head, and he retched sideways before Andy caught him. He fought the restraint briefly, terrified by his own body, then clutched at Andy's sleeve with fingers that did not seem to know how hard to hold. His body shook as if every muscle had remembered itself at once.

'Are you OK Dad?' Max said. The voice was hoarse, human and terrified.

'Yes, I'm OK.'

Roberts took care of the second sentry outside the basement gatehouse. He'd assumed a squad of eight, remembering the vehicles from the parking yard. Roberts had killed four men in the basement area. The other four would patrol a kill zone between the outer skin of the building; they'd be with him in the fog. He had killed one man in reception, which left three more between him and freedom; three more between Julia and the evidence she'd decided must survive her.

Roberts held Julia's wrist as they walked through the fog. His grip was too tight because his left hand had begun to shake. She did not like the grip, but she let it stand until she saw he was following the white line rather than dragging her blindly. They passed a storeroom, only visible as the door was open. Julia

pulled him into it and shut the door to break their outline in the mist. A pair of empty handcuffs lay on the floor, next to a cracked pipe. Steam rose from the ground and mixed with the fog propelled from the fans in the roof. There was nothing elegant left in the operation now: only damp concrete, ruined sight lines and people improvising badly.

The white line had been painted for evacuation drills, not escape. Julia had walked it with visitors during fire tests and once complained that it made the basement look like a school gym. Now it was the only honest thing in the corridor.

Julia and Roberts left the storeroom and crept forward. The blinking lights reminded Julia of Christmas, back when her father decorated the house and she believed clever people could make darkness harmless. She wondered when ambition had stopped feeling like escape and started feeling like a locked door. The dead men in the fog proved she had already chosen a side: she had opened valves, altered alarms and let confusion do what conscience alone could not.

She had not become innocent by choosing late. She had only chosen late. Max was still breathing. Adam was not.

Roberts estimated they'd walked fifty metres when he tripped over the next body, another soldier that Roberts hadn't killed. He had assumed Julia had only opened valves and confused alarms. He had not assumed Bob's old safety routines would mark armed men as contaminants and turn the building against anyone

moving too quickly. After another thirty metres they'd be out of this smog hole. He helped Julia over the body and picked up the pace.

He recovered on one knee and hated how long the movement took. Julia saw him hide the shaking hand against his thigh. Roberts saw that she had seen it, which made the weakness feel less like pain and more like exposure.

From memory, Roberts knew the route, but he dared not run in case another blockage lay ahead. Twice he put a hand out and found only air where a wall should have been. The facility had shifted from map to maze the moment Bob's system woke up. He found the final dead soldier near reception. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. Three soldiers down that he had not killed. He saw the light from the car park and felt a desperate urge to leave the mist.

Roberts ran, holding Julia's hand, out into the light. The first round hit his arm, and the second round hit Julia in the leg. The car park was full of police vehicles along with their occupants. He tried to help Julia off the floor, but the bullets whizzed past him and pinged into the steel cladding of the building.

Roberts let go of her and raced around the corner and through a line of trees. The wound in his arm pulled tight with every stride, forcing his elbow close to his ribs. A steel gate loomed ahead with high fencing surrounding it: the sports pitch on the land next to the PKL building. Roberts made it to the gate; the padlock

was on the floor. He walked through and into the arena.

He tried to lift the arm over a low branch and failed the first time. The second attempt worked because he ducked instead.

The route simplified itself in front of him: car park behind, trees to the side, gate ahead, open pitch beyond. There was no clever route left, only distance.

A few paramedics and police officers milled around an ambulance.

One man walked up to Roberts. The man carried no weapon and wore no shirt; he had various dressings covering him. 'You can go back and face them or take your chances with me,' said Jamie.

FIFTY

Roberts saw something rare in Jamie's eyes. He had seen it before in jungles, deserts and half-destroyed cities: the moment when a man stopped bargaining with fear. Jamie was hurt, half-dressed and shaking, but he was not moving aside. Roberts understood the signal. This time, he ran.

He ran along the running track and up into the spectator seating. It was not a sprint now. His left side would not give him one. Jamie followed.

The old Roberts would have disliked that and corrected for it before anyone else noticed. This Roberts had no spare correction left. The hospital had taken time, the pitch had taken distance, and Jamie had taken the clean exit.

The pitch lay open behind him, police gathered near the ambulance to his right and the old stand rose ahead in shallow concrete tiers. If he reached the roofline, he might still find another edge to bargain with.

Jamie took three steps after him and nearly lost the fourth. Pain flashed from his injured foot into his hip, bright enough to empty the world briefly. He grabbed the rail, swallowed bile and kept moving because stopping would mean explaining to himself why Roberts

had got away.

Roberts reached the top row, jumped for the concrete parapet of the old stand and hauled himself over with his good arm. Jamie was already below him, fast and quiet despite the blood. Fingers brushed Roberts's boot. Roberts kicked, missed, and Jamie came over the wall.

The narrow platform ran in front of a line of glass windows. Beyond it, a cast-iron drainpipe climbed to the roof. Roberts went up it without looking down, using his knees more than his hands. His wounded arm burned. His ruined timing irritated him more than the pain. He reached the gutter and pulled, squinting into the pale light coming off the stone circle on the hill.

There were no real choices now: parapet behind, glass to one side, drainpipe up, roof above. Jamie saw the same map and did not rush it.

Roberts saw it too, and for the first time the map did not improve when he looked again. Every route now depended on another man making the mistake first.

Jamie caught his ankle.

Roberts kicked back, missed, and slipped. He rolled down the sloping roof, fingers clawing at moss, and stopped near the lower edge. Ten metres below, a grass bank fell away towards a stream.

Jamie stood higher on the roof, blood on his face and shirt. He had the angle and the patience. That was worse.

‘There’s a way out,’ Jamie said, and nodded over the edge.

Roberts looked down. The fall might kill him. If it did not, it would break enough of him to make capture certain. He took two careful steps uphill. His arm was slow, his eye streamed, his back had tightened since the hospital lift, and Jamie had noticed all of it.

Jamie let him come close. Roberts threw first. Jamie caught the punch, turned the arm and hit him cleanly on the chin. Roberts dragged him into the slope. The roof made everything ugly: knees, elbows, breath, wet moss under their palms.

Jamie tried to reset his stance, but his damaged foot would not obey quickly enough. Roberts saw it and lunged for that side, not because he was stronger now, but because he had found something in Jamie that would not answer orders.

Roberts locked an arm around Jamie’s head and squeezed. Jamie’s injured foot slid. For one second Roberts felt the old pattern return: pressure, panic, surrender. Then Jamie drove his thumb into Roberts’s eye and Roberts let go with a sound that was more animal than human.

Roberts rolled away, both hands clamped over his face.

‘Enough,’ Roberts said. He blinked blood and water from his good eye. The roof had taken his advantage. The hospital had taken some of his strength. Jamie had taken the rest. ‘I’ll come with you.’

Roberts raised his empty hand exactly far enough to look compliant and exactly low enough to keep options. Jamie remembered a screen in a car park offering three clean buttons and no honest choice. He did not move closer.

Jamie stayed where he was, chest heaving, the pistol steady in his hand. The old version of him might have answered. The new one did not trust words spoken by a man like Roberts on a roof like this.

The fire brigade used a cherry picker to bring them down. Armed officers kept their rifles trained on Roberts while a paramedic pressed dressings to his ruined eye. Jamie allowed himself to sit only after Amy reached him. By then the strength had gone out of his legs, and the shakes came all at once. Amy did not say anything at first. She put both hands on his face, checked he was real, and held him while he tried not to collapse into her.

The public inquiry that followed did not make the truth simple.

Baker found the car-park payment log before he found the recovery driver. A sergeant admitted the custody rota had been short and agency medical cover had become normal. A hospital receptionist remembered the passphrase before she remembered Roberts' face. The same courier references appeared in places that had seemed unrelated.

The pattern was uglier than the headline: prepared fall-backs, forms, tired staff, bad cameras, agency cover

and subcontracted security.

Amy gave it another name in her own notes: borrowed trust. Roberts had never needed people to believe him for long. He only needed them to believe the badge, the rota, the work order or the label for the length of one bad decision.

Every answer arrived with a missing log, a dead contractor, a dissolved company or a lawyer explaining why knowledge and responsibility were not quite the same thing.

Max proved only what nobody wanted proved: the protocol could alter a healthy living brain outside controlled conditions. The compound was destroyed. The equipment was sealed, dismantled or taken into evidence. The official conclusion used careful language: unstable response transfer, severe contamination risk, no therapeutic pathway.

Roberts spent a few days in hospital and then went to remand. A jury convicted him of murdering Jake McGuire. The judge sentenced him to life imprisonment, with a minimum term of thirty years. Prison did not improve him, but it contained him. Most men learned quickly not to test the glass eye.

Steven George's family received no useful comfort from the inquiry. Nikki sat through three days of evidence and left before the lawyers began arguing over corporate knowledge.

Andy watched her give evidence on the public feed from his kitchen table, with the sound low enough that Jess would not hear it upstairs. Nikki wore a dark jacket and no jewellery except her wedding ring. The camera made the room look flatter than it was: a row of microphones, a glass of water, a name plate, lawyers with paper in front of them and Nikki's hands folded so tightly her knuckles had gone pale.

The barrister began gently. Steve's travel arrangements. The flight from Dublin. The call with Tommy. The toy duck. Nikki answered each question in full sentences and never once looked towards the public gallery. She had the sequence almost as carefully as Andy did: the illness, the recovery, Steve's joke about being missed only after he had left the country, the promise to call before bed. Ordinary facts, arranged under oath until they became unbearable.

Andy had expected anger. Anger would have given him somewhere to stand. Nikki's calmness was worse. She did not say his name or accuse him of opening the bag, failing to stop the van, cutting the first call short or leaving the duck on a pub table until a waitress tried to be kind. She simply told the inquiry what Steve had said, when he had said it and what her son had asked him to bring home.

When the barrister asked whether Steve had sounded afraid, Nikki looked down for the first time. 'No,' she said. 'He sounded like Steve. That was the problem. Steve could make danger sound like a story he was

going to tell properly later.' Andy reached for the pause button and missed it. The feed kept running while Nikki took a sip of water with both hands.

Andy turned it off before she finished. The black screen showed his own reflection, older than the man who had stood outside the pub with a pint and a friend's cabin bag. He wrote to her twice that afternoon and tore both letters up. In the end he sent one page: what Steve had said about Tommy, what Andy had done when the phone rang, and the one sentence he could not improve by lengthening. I am not writing to ask you to forgive me. I am writing because Steve was my friend and I owe you the truth without making myself sound better in it.

When her answer came, it was only four lines. She thanked him for Steve's last joke, said Tommy had kept asking whether London had stolen his dad, and told Andy not to write back yet. Andy folded the letter once and kept it in the drawer where he used to keep Max's old messages.

Later, when the inquiry schedule described Steve as the Rose Street civilian fatality, Andy submitted a correction through the witness portal. He changed nothing in the evidence. He only added the name the form had not needed: Steven George, husband, father, friend. The clerk accepted the amendment without comment.

The line that mattered most to her was not a confession or a technical phrase. It was a front-desk log with a completed callback beside it, signed by a person she had spoken to herself. This time the paperwork followed the

check, not the other way round.

At home, Tommy kept the rubber duck's head in a drawer for three weeks before Nikki found it and threw it away. Andy never asked whether that was mercy or anger.

A month later Nikki sent Andy a photograph she had not meant to send: Tommy's hand closed around a cheap yellow replacement from a seaside gift shop. The new duck had no history, no tag, no split tail and no purple threads. Andy looked at it for longer than he should have, then deleted the photograph because some evidence was not his to keep.

Steve had always been the friend who made consequences arrive late. Now Andy was left with minutes: the table, the failed call, the password nobody knew, the green tick, the tag, the photograph, the duck in its little bowl of water. The order never changed.

Julia Matthews pleaded guilty to killing Patrick Laws. She gave evidence against the men behind the facility, named the missing files and accepted the part she had played in turning treatment into ownership. She did not call Laws mad. She called him consistent, which sounded worse.

In court she spoke without theatre. She did not ask to be understood and did not offer grief as an excuse. She named Laws, Rand, the shell companies and the men who had hidden behind procurement language. The judge called her evidence exceptional and her offending

grave. Both things were true.

Jamie wrote too, coached by Mike Baker. His account covered the events that had led to his arrest after the deaths of armed men at the PKL facility. Mike kept him precise and kept the case focused on necessity, injury and fear rather than heroics. The Crown reviewed the forensic evidence, the radio logs and the surviving CCTV before the case collapsed into self-defence. Jamie accepted the outcome more slowly. He was still thinking about it on the morning of his wedding.

Amy read the draft once and gave it back without correcting a word. She had seen Jamie try to make killing sound like paperwork and paperwork sound like survival. On bad nights he still woke with his hands clenched, listening for blanks that had not been blanks and footsteps that had already stopped.

She had also added one thing of her own to the file: the custody rota, the provider callback, the false photograph, the second false FME request and the exact time the paperwork became more persuasive than the person standing in front of it. Her note was only three pages long. Baker said it did more damage than some witness statements ten times the length.

Months later, Amy still checked identity cards twice when they came through glass. Nobody laughed after the first time. Jamie noticed the habit and never told her to stop.

On their wedding morning, Jamie found her in the kitchen with the kettle boiling and the back door open to the cold. She had been awake since five. He did not ask why. He put his arms around her from behind, and for once neither of them tried to turn fear into a joke.

Rob remembered the ring. Jamie's mum and dad missed the wedding because of a pre-arranged engagement in Hong Kong with a minor royal, which Amy said was the most Jamie-family excuse possible.

Amy's wedding dress train ran for five metres, attended by Becky, the chief bridesmaid, and four others. Most of the two hundred guests sat on the left side of the church, but Mike Baker, Sergeant Thomas, Janet, Frank and Tom sat front and right: rental guests, Amy's mum said, for balance.

When Amy kissed Jamie, Jess kissed Andy. Andy held the moment longer than he normally would. He could still feel the weight of Max in his arms at the hospital, the useless heat of the PKL building, the impossible silence before Max opened his eyes. He had come close to becoming a man people comforted rather than a man people came home to. Since then, he had stopped trusting happiness to stay unless he paid attention.

Andy and Jess sat on the grass on a warm October morning. The last heat of the Indian summer lingered over the rugby pitch, and they savoured it. Andy had become greedy for days that asked nothing of him.

'He's playing well today,' Andy said.

'He's played well in every match this season,' Jess said. 'Do you think it's something to do with this summer? What you were saying about Adam?'

Andy watched Max cut inside a defender and pass instead of taking the glory himself. That was new. Or perhaps Andy was only noticing now because he was afraid to miss anything.

'Max remembers being in the machine,' Andy said. 'Not everything. Enough.'

'And Adam?'

'He says Adam was there like a memory that did not belong to him. Not a voice exactly. More like an old shortcut his mind kept taking under stress.'

Jess kept her eyes on the pitch. 'But some of it stayed.'

'The doctors call it contamination, adaptation, trauma. Max says something helped him hold on. I don't know what to call that.'

Andy had learned the difference between care and possession too late to feel proud of it. The doctors could name the residue. Andy could only refuse to turn his son back into evidence.

That meant leaving some questions unanswered even when every frightened part of him wanted measurements, scans and predictions. He had spent the summer chasing explanations. Now he was trying to trust.

He had answered Max's last proper message too late. He would not answer this new version of his son with tests, traps and questions disguised as care.

Max looked towards the far touchline before Sam turned that way. Andy saw it, opened his mouth, then closed it again. Some questions were only another way of taking his son back to the room.

Jess took his hand. 'And you believe him?'

Andy looked at their son, laughing now, grass-stained and alive. 'I believe he came back changed. I believe we were lucky. I believe he chose us. I don't think I need to pretend the rest is tidy.'

The final whistle blew. Max slapped his mates on the back, and they hugged him in return. Near the touchline, Sam and another small boy chased a pigeon between bursts of wrestling.

Max came over to his little brother, lifted him off the ground and hugged him close. Sam complained for form's sake, then wrapped both arms around Max's neck. His friend wandered back to his mother, which meant Sam won the chase by default.

Max waved to his parents. Andy waved back and put his thumb in the air. Max turned towards the changing room with his team, leaving Sam alone by the touchline.

Sam looked at the pigeon. The chase tempted him. Then he turned away from it and ran back to Jess and Andy.

Andy watched him come back and did not call it a miracle. He put an arm around Jess, kept his eyes on both boys, and let the morning be enough.

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Thank you again for reading.

Paul Watson