

'All hail the new Queen of Crime' Heat

The Angel

Some things can't be forgiven...



THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

KATERINA DIAMOND

Katerina Diamond

The Angel: A shocking new thriller – read if you dare!

Аннотация

The Queen of Grip-lit is back... ‘A terrific story, originally told. All hail the new Queen of Crime!’ HEAT ‘A web of a plot that twists and turns and keeps the reader on the edge of their seat. This formidable debut is a page-turner, but don’t read it before bed if you’re easily spooked!’ SUN When a burned body is found in a disused signal box, suspicion falls on lonely teenager Gabriel Webb. There’s no doubt he was at the scene of the crime, but does he really deserve what awaits him in prison? DS Imogen Grey is certain there’s more to the case than meets the eye. But while she struggles to convince those around her of the truth, her partner DS Adrian Miles is distracted by his own demons. When a brutal double murder is reported, their investigation is stopped in its tracks. Is the body in the box even who they thought it was? The duo realise Gabriel might have been locked up for a crime he didn’t commit. But with enemies watching Gabriel’s every move, they may be too late. Miles and Grey are back in the thrilling new novel from bestselling author Katerina Diamond, perfect for fans of Karin Slaughter and M.J. Arlidge.

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The Angel

KATERINA DIAMOND

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Copyright



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Praise for *Katerina Diamond*

‘Diamond is the master of gripping literature.’

The Evening Standard

‘A terrific story, originally told. All hail the new queen of crime!’ *Heat*

‘A web of a plot that twists and turns and keeps the reader on the edge of their seat. This formidable debut is a page-turner, but don’t read it before bed if you’re easily spooked!’ *The Sun*

‘A page-turner with a keep-you-guessing plot.’

Sunday Times Crime Club

‘Diamond neatly handles a string of interlocking strands.’
Daily Mail

‘This gem of a crime novel is packed with twists until the last page.’ *Closer*

‘A deliciously dark read, Katerina Diamond keeps her readers guessing throughout as she leads us on a very secretive, VERY twisted journey ... everything I was expecting from a well-written, pacy thriller.’

Lisa Hall, author of *Between You And Me*

‘A dark, twisting tale that won’t fail to captivate.’

Mint Velvet

‘Wow, I thought *The Teacher* was fantastic but *The Secret* is on another level. Was gripped all the way through and kept me guessing as the story unfolded.’

NetGalley Reviewer

‘Another grim and gory spider’s web from Katerina Diamond – closely following on from *The Teacher* and not letting up on the twists and turns.’

Goodreads Reviewer

‘An impeccable novel with nail biting chapters ... Katerina Diamond deserves the title of Queen of Crime, because I’ll be damned if anyone writes novels like she does. 5* doesn’t do this book justice.’

The Brunette Bookshelf

‘Has the feeling of a nightmare come to life ...’

Lovereadings

‘The suspense is literally out of this world.’

Compelling Reads

‘A dark and twisted tale that had me gasping in fear.’

Handwritten Girl

Dedication

To Oliver,

Work hard and stay out of prison. Love Mum x

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Prologue

1986

The snow had clogged the driveway and most of the village too. Since the morning, it had been relentless even though the news had only predicted a mild flurry. Martina looked outside at the road; it was thick with it, crisp and untouched; an idyllic prison. The neighbour's Christmas tree was abandoned by the bins. The binmen had refused to take it week after week, but belligerent old Murray left it there as a point of protest. Even the rubbish looked pretty when it was covered in snow.

She wondered how long she had before the baby woke up. He would be hungry when he did and she was out of formula. Her husband was trapped at work and she couldn't be without the formula when Jamie woke up. There would be no going to the shops; she doubted most of them were even open.

Martina threw another log on the fire; even though it wasn't cold inside the house, she loved the feeling of security the flames gave her. The fire kept her company when she was alone, when the baby was asleep. Her husband had been stuck at work more times than she could remember; since she had had the baby she was almost certain he was having an affair. She was always aware that she was a trophy wife in the first place and she had lost her sparkle in the last year or so; pregnancy had almost destroyed

her and post-partum depression was finishing the job. She just hadn't expected it to be this hard, this lonely. She picked up the red Bakelite phone she'd got for Christmas and dialled the neighbours.

Charlie and Sophia had been their next-door-but-one neighbours for the last three years and in that time they had become close. Martina and Sophie had gone through their pregnancies together.

Charlie answered the phone.

'Hi Charlie.'

'Martina? Is everything all right?' His voice was a whisper.

'Sorry, did I disturb you?'

'No, it's just Soph has the flu, she's asleep and I don't want to wake her up.'

'Oh, I was just wondering if you had any formula I could borrow, I'm all out and when bub wakes up I'm going to be in trouble.'

'Yeah we have an extra tin ... I'll bring some over ... hang on.'

His voice tailed off.

'What's wrong?'

'Just thinking I should probably bring the little 'un with me, Soph's in no condition to deal with him.'

'Have you eaten?' Martina asked. 'I'll do you a trade – grown-up food for baby food?'

'That sounds brilliant, are you sure?'

'It's just me and the baby here, you'll be doing me a huge

favour so it's the least I can do.'

'OK, give me half an hour to sort some soup out for Soph and feed the baby, then I'll be over.'

'See you then.'

Martina poured the Badedas into the water and watched as it bubbled. Why was she having a bath? She was excited at the prospect of Charlie coming over on his own, but she felt guilty for it. This was probably the first time she had thought of Charlie as a man, usually he was just Sophie's husband, the neighbour, but the idea of seeing him without Sophie had separated him somehow: now he was just Charlie.

She put some rollers in her hair, she'd only washed it yesterday, so hopefully it would hold the style better. She was making herself pretty for a man who wasn't her husband. It was his own fault; he had made her feel ugly, both during the pregnancy and since the baby had been born. She knew she wasn't ugly and so maybe this flirtation would be enough to boost her confidence, encourage her to start making an effort again. She sprayed herself with Opium and opted for a green chiffon dress; the red was maybe a little too daring but the green made her brown eyes look like creamy dark chocolate. She looked at herself in the mirror and reached for the lipstick that was the right colour for her; she had read in *Cosmo* that you should wear a lipstick the same colour as your nipples if you wanted to attract someone – as if they would even know, but the user surveys assured her it worked.

The doorbell rang and Martina answered it, her heart beating fast. It was still glowing outside even though the sun had gone down, the snow reflecting the street lamps. Satisfaction crept over Martina as she saw a flicker in Charlie's eye, a recognition that she was a beautiful woman. She hadn't seen that look for a while, least of all from her husband. He handed her the baby formula. She looked at the tin in her hand, confused for a moment, almost forgetting why she had invited him over. Smiling, she walked inside, leaving the door open and without even asking the question. She put the formula next to the sink and turned to see Charlie standing behind her, a little too close. She could see him concentrating on making sure his eyes stayed fixed on her face; no glancing down.

'Would you like some wine?'

'Yes please, that sounds perfect. Can I put the baby down somewhere? He's just nodded off.'

'Sure, put him in the cot with Jamie.'

Charlie disappeared upstairs and Martina adjusted her breasts, undoing one more button on her dress. She took the roasted chicken she had made in the afternoon out of the oven and placed it on the table, then set the table for two and took a bottle of white wine out of the fridge.

Charlie appeared again and smoothed down his trousers nervously before sitting at the table. Martina served him some salad and a leg of chicken while he poured the wine for them both. She cleared her throat. This felt like a date, which hadn't

really been her intention. Or had it?

She tried to think about Sophie laid up in bed, or her husband stuck at work, kept away by the snow. The smaller villages outside the city were never really a priority for the salt that the council sometimes provided to keep the roads clear.

They ate together, making small talk while the babies remained asleep. Martina opened a second bottle of wine, aware that she was feeling tipsy, a welcome warmth in her belly that only came when she was drunk. It had been so long since she had relaxed, it hadn't even occurred to her before how tense she felt usually. Being in a conversation with a different man awakened her to how bad the conversations she had with her husband were, with him always making her feel stupid or shutting her down before she had even started.

His obsession with their son had taken over their lives; she had become someone who only existed to make sure the baby got everything he needed. She didn't begrudge Jamie, but she did begrudge the change he had made in her husband – who was now only ever interested in the world as it affected his son. It was as though it were the first time he was feeling love, and the intensity of that had driven him slightly insane. She wondered what he had felt for her, if his professions of love were more to do with lust and the fact that she was desired by others.

She needed to shake this feeling; she needed Charlie to leave. It was closing in on eight o'clock and somehow this had become something real, something dangerous. As they finished

the second bottle of wine she caught Charlie looking at her; within half an hour she had seen his eyes rest on her knee, her breasts, her eyes and now her mouth. Slowly, he leaned forward to kiss her, she leaned in too and they met halfway. The line had been crossed, now there was nothing to stop them as they moved in clumsily, crashing into each other, standing and pawing at the buttons and zips, frantically searching for a way to an intimate connection.

As Martina's dress dropped to the ground she felt the wetness of Charlie's lips on her breasts; unfamiliar, not her husband's, not better or worse, just different. She couldn't pretend she was the faithful one anymore, though she was aware that her husband wasn't innocent. Maybe he was snuggled in front of a different fire with some other woman right now. She refused to feel bad. He showed her no affection and so this was his fault. That's what she would keep telling herself anyway.

Charlie moved with her and against her; this was the first time she'd had intercourse since the baby, it had been months and it felt good. She was an attractive woman, a mantra she told herself every time her husband grunted at a new outfit she wore, a new haircut, new lingerie. She had ceased to exist for him, it was just the baby and whoever else he was seeing behind her back. He would never know about this though. This would be her little secret.

She wouldn't do it again, she told herself. She would knock this on the head straight away. If her husband ever found out

about Charlie she would be in big trouble and he would probably kill him. She had seen him do things that had shocked and repulsed her, his assurances that they were unusual instances rang less and less true each time. She pushed thoughts of her husband aside and dragged Charlie towards the sofa, sitting down while he climbed on top. The way his hands grabbed at her, the way he pushed her back and moved her legs so he could climb between them, it was all different.

Charlie was frantic now, her nails dug into his back and he buried his mouth in her neck as he moved faster. She had never been with another man before and she was surprised at how good it felt. They crashed together until finally he let out a groan. Almost simultaneously, the baby started crying. Charlie collapsed onto her and they both laughed. For her it was a nervous laugh, it was the acknowledgment that they were back in the present and they had done something unforgivable. After a minute or two, Charlie climbed off her and pulled his trousers on properly, surveying the floor for his shirt. She could tell he was shocked; he hadn't come over here with this in mind. Now it had happened there was no reversing it.

'That's yours,' she said.

'Excuse me?' he answered, his face flushed, the full weight of his guilt now evident.

'That's not Jamie's cry.'

'Oh ... OK.' Grateful, she assumed, for the distraction, he pulled his boots on and rushed upstairs. She took the opportunity

to search for her own clothes, buttoning her chiffon dress up quickly.

‘Martina! Oh, my God, Martina!’ Charlie’s voice rang out over his baby’s cries.

‘What?’ She ran up the stairs and into the baby’s room. Charlie was holding his child, staring into the cot in horror. The look on his face told her everything she needed to know. Before she even looked inside, she was holding her breath. Jamie, her little boy, the child she and her husband had so desperately wanted, was blue. Her heart stopped.

‘What do I do?’

Charlie handed her his own son and took Jamie out of the cot, rushing to the bathroom. ‘Call an ambulance,’ he shouted. She ran upstairs with the phone in time to see Charlie run warm water into the bath. He lay Jamie in the tub and scooped warm water over him until he warmed up, then pulled his little body out of the bath and wrapped a towel around him, massaging his chest. Within moments, Jamie was crying again. It wasn’t his usual cry though. It was a soft, tentative cry. She felt so helpless.

It wasn’t long before they heard the sirens; nothing got the ambulance moving faster than a baby in distress and not even snow could stop them, there were chains on the tyres. Charlie was covered in water and Martina just stood there helplessly, watching as two paramedics wrapped her child in blankets and hurried him out to the ambulance.

‘Is he OK? Is my baby OK?’ she said frantically.

‘We need to get him assessed properly, it depends how long he was without oxygen. There may be permanent brain damage, but it’s impossible to know at this point.’ One of the paramedics made eye contact with her, the other wouldn’t meet her gaze.

Charlie grabbed his son and followed as Martina hastily did the rest of her dress buttons up and grabbed her coat. That’s when she saw her husband’s car, pulling into the drive just as the paramedics got in the back of the ambulance. One of them offered her a hand to bring her inside too. She saw her husband get out of the car and approach them, saw his confused gaze as his eyes wandered over her dress. She looked down and saw she had buttoned it wrong – he then looked at Charlie, his trousers hanging from his hips, shirt half untucked, no ambiguity about what had been going on.

‘Martina? What the fuck is going on?’

‘I’m so sorry, it’s Jamie, he stopped breathing!’

‘Are you coming with us, ma’am? We really need to get going. He was without oxygen for at least a couple of minutes, he needs to see one of the doctors ASAP,’ the paramedic’s voice was urgent. Martina saw panic flood her husband’s face.

‘No, I’ll come,’ he said, stepping in front of Martina as though she wasn’t even there.

‘I’m sorry! I didn’t mean for this to happen!’ she cried, tears streaming down her face, knowing full well that he knew what she had done.

‘Mate ...’ Charlie looked at his feet.

‘I’ll deal with both of you later!’ He clambered up into the ambulance and pulled the door shut.

Martina watched as the ambulance pulled away. Just at that moment Charlie’s son started to cry, a normal cry, a baby out in the snow cry. She couldn’t look at him. She ran back inside, slamming the door. She couldn’t let Charlie back in the house, not now.

The phone rang and Martina answered. It was her husband.

‘Is he OK?’

‘I want you out of the house by the time we get home. I never want to see your face again.’

‘But ... it was an accident.’

‘I know what happened. I know what you did. It was obvious from the state of you both.’

‘I was lonely. I know it’s no excuse but since Jamie was born you have made me feel worthless. I just wanted to feel special for one night. I didn’t mean for that to happen, you must know I didn’t!’

‘And that makes it OK?’

‘No, of course it doesn’t.’

‘He’s in intensive care at the moment. I want you to know if he doesn’t pull through, your life won’t be worth living.’

‘Please ...’

‘Both of you will wish you were dead.’ He put the phone down.

She knew that he wasn’t one to make idle threats, she had seen him do things that other women would have run a mile from.

She knew a dark side of him that most people didn't see. It had excited her at the beginning; the way some people would look when he walked into a pub or a club, the way people backed away from him and feared him. The time he had shoved a broken bottle into the face of a man in the street who was rude to Martina had been the moment she knew he was the one. No one had ever defended her like that before. He wouldn't let this go.

She grabbed her Valium from the bathroom cabinet and a bottle of gin from the kitchen. She couldn't live without her son, she couldn't live knowing she hadn't been there when he needed her the most, knowing that while her son lay almost lifeless in the room upstairs she was having a meaningless encounter with a man she wasn't even particularly attracted to. Her husband had made it clear that she wouldn't be a part of Jamie's life anymore and so she took the pills one by one with a swig of gin. She was already fairly drunk from the wine at dinner, and it was an easy decision to make; barely a decision at all. She drifted away on her terms, wanting her husband to feel the pain of her loss. She wanted him to feel bad for speaking to her that way, she wanted him to feel as though he should have come home in time to wake her. She wanted him to feel like this was his fault. This time, she would have the last word.

Chapter 1

2017

Gabriel Webb was a killer. He didn't know it yet, but before the day was out he would know what it felt like to take someone's life. He turned the music up in his bedroom to drown out the sound of his parents arguing about him. Apparently, he was 'out of control' and 'needed to be taken in hand'. His mother had suggested sending him to live with an aunt in Cheltenham. His father had suggested forcing him to join the army, which 'might show him how good he had it at home'. All this because Gabriel had shoulder-length hair and occasionally wore eyeliner.

He pulled on his red tartan punk trousers and leather New Rock boots, feeding the laces through the chrome shin panels on the front. Searching through his tops, he tried to decide which one to wear today, which one would be best for what they had planned. His phone beeped and he looked at the screen. An array of emojis all signifying excitement from his girlfriend Emma, listed in his phone as Proserpina, Roman Goddess and Queen of the underworld. He was in her phone as Pluto, the God of Death. Embracing darkness was part of the fun of being a goth. Tonight, they were going to see Apocalyptica, a nu-metal band, in a local club, a rare occurrence in Exeter now that the artisan hipster gin bars had all but taken over the city.

Gabriel pulled on his black wet-look cycling top; it hugged his lean muscular frame and he loved the way Emma looked at him when he was in it. He would catch her eyes resting on his chest as she swallowed hard, suppressing whatever desire his body aroused in her until they were alone. He grabbed the black buckled leather cincher out of his wardrobe and put it on, despite his parents' voices echoing in his head. *A man in a corset? Ridiculous.* It wasn't like it pulled his waist in or anything, it was just a fashion statement – not a nod to his sexuality. He couldn't worry about what his parents thought though. His clothes were an expression of himself, for himself. It wasn't about shocking anyone or even about rebelling. It was about feeling good in his skin, and this outfit made Gabriel feel good. He wrapped black electrical tape around his wrists and hands, then picked up the black eyeliner and drew a star on his left cheek. He was ready.

On entering the kitchen, his mother took a deep breath and turned her attention to the kitchen sink. Avoiding being a part of the conversation that was about to happen.

'What the hell are you wearing?' Michael Webb, Gabriel's father, had an expression like thunder, but that wasn't unusual, it was the standard greeting these days.

'Clothes.' Gabriel grabbed an apple and started to eat it. He had a foot on his father, but he was still uneasy. He wouldn't say what he wanted to say, he never did. It was always better just to let his father rant and then leave anyway.

'You're a bloody man – when are you going to start acting like

one?" his father sniped. "Who's going to employ you looking like that? You're nineteen years old for God's sake. Isn't it time to grow up?"

"A job like yours, you mean?" Gabriel said. "I should be a drone?"

"My drone job pays for those god-awful trousers you are wearing! I mean what the hell are all those straps and chain things hanging down? What kind of message do you think you're putting across with those?" His father tugged hard at the cord that linked the trousers together, ripping it. He looked at Gabriel with a sneer.

Gabriel smiled back with a pinched mouth. He was contemplating punching his father in the face – and not for the first time.

"Anything else?" He leaned down closer to his father, locking eyes with him – making sure he didn't look away first.

The anger in his father's eyes faltered for a moment.

"Don't even get me started on your face. Men don't wear make-up, and what's with the star? You look like a fucking communist."

"Michael! Language!" Gabriel's mother Penny said.

"I'm off to meet some friends, I'll probably stay out tonight." Gabriel walked out, shaking his head, his father's insults getting fainter as he got further from the house. It was the most disrespectful he had ever been but he couldn't tolerate this nonsense today. He was in a good mood and he wasn't going to let his father ruin it. He was going to see Emma; he had texted

her before he left, so she should be waiting outside. She lived three streets over. He had first seen her working in his local supermarket sometimes at the weekends, she'd always stood a little straighter when he walked past and so he knew she had seen him too. One day he just asked her out; she had said yes immediately and the rest was history.

Emma was standing outside her house with her new friend, Leanne. He saw Emma's eyes light up as she saw him approaching, sucking in her breath in a way that turned him on. He knew what she was thinking about as she glanced at his body for a split second. He was thinking about it too. There had always been a certain electricity between them, he felt an involuntary breathlessness around her that only abated when they were locked together. He was always anticipating the next kiss.

'You changed your hair again.' He pointed to her roots which were a neon red, the rest a trailing black tangle down her back. She chewed on the back of her labret lip piercing and smiled at Gabriel. Leanne was obviously clueless about personal boundaries as she hung onto Emma's arm. Emma's eyes said *later* and he found himself excited at being forced to wait.

'We're going to go meet Leanne's mates, they're coming too.'

Gabriel didn't know Leanne well but she had attached herself to Emma lately. They worked together at Tesco on Saturdays. Together, the three of them walked up through Heavitree and past the bus station. They kept walking, past the town, up towards the prison and beyond that, to the fencing that separated

the railway tracks from the road, keeping local kids and cats from sliding down the bank and wandering into the path of an oncoming train.

It had started to spit. As they approached the fence, Gabriel saw two guys in their late teens standing waiting for them, hoods pulled up against the rain. Leanne yanked up some of the chicken wire fencing and disappeared behind it. Gabriel and Emma followed. The disused signal box near Exeter Central station was a known hangout for some of the less savoury characters that Leanne was friends with. As they made their way down, Gabriel heard a commotion and the sound of glass smashing; he was kind of excited at the rebelliousness of it all. In Gabriel's eyes, the only thing worse than being bored was listening to his parents either fighting or fucking. Tonight was going to be far from boring, he would make sure of it.

Gabriel had seen the boys by the tracks in town before; they were Laners. Laners were the scum of the city as far as most people were concerned. Burnthouse Lane had a reputation for being home to some of the more violent members of local society. Between the ASBOs and the muggings there was little love left for the Laners. The kids were left to fend for themselves and the adults just did what they wanted. There was no community feel to the Lane, except among the teens. Several of the boys claimed to be the offspring of the Sly crew, the firm of football thugs that supported Exeter FC and made a name for themselves in the eighties. The Sly crew were not only well

known for their random acts of violence, but also their almost myth-like status. None of the teens were sure if they had ever actually existed or not, which somehow made them even more terrifying to boys like Gabriel growing up. Everyone from the Lane had a story about the Sly crew, usually exaggerated to the point where they had witnessed a murder or were owed a massive favour that they could call in at any time.

Inside, the signal box was set up like an office, with all the levers chained to the wall, although most likely no longer connected to the tracks. There were three large chairs facing the centre and various wrappers, bottles, needles and other rubbish lying around the place. Gabriel stayed standing, aware that they may need to start running at any moment if anyone figured out they were in there. Emma wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her arms as though she was cold and huddling up on a chair, crossing her legs to stay warmer.

‘This is Trey and this is Chris.’ Leanne pointed at her friends, who took the other two chairs. ‘Fucking hell, it’s freezing in here!’

Gabriel didn’t like the way the boys were looking at Emma, as though she were somehow there for their entertainment. He hated the idea that just because she wore a short skirt and fishnets that somehow that was for anyone other than herself. It was a mindset that people who weren’t part of the alternative scene didn’t appreciate. You dress for yourself. It would never occur to Gabriel to tell Emma what to wear and yet she had the same problem with her parents that he had with his. Today, she

was wearing a very short black denim miniskirt with a bustle, fishnet tights and knee-high boots. He could see what these boys were thinking. They were making assumptions about the kind of things Emma would or would not do just because she wore black leather and studs. Gabriel hated people sometimes.

Emma shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Gabriel wished he had a coat he could take off and give to her.

One of the boys pulled out a crack pipe and Gabriel clenched his teeth. Why the hell were they here? This was a little more rebellion than he liked to engage in. Gabriel had smoked weed a few times, he had even had some skunk, but this stuff? No, this was not his place at all. People often assumed Gabriel was on something because he was so slim and he had long hair, and because he sometimes wore make-up; it was just the way people operated. They made assumptions. But this really wasn't Gabriel's idea of fun.

Emma looked up at Gabriel with an apologetic face. She knew how much he hated these kinds of people.

The Laners grunted and looked Gabriel up and down. 'Want some?' One of them held the black, stained pipe out towards Gabriel.

'No thanks,' he replied.

'Are you going to be a problem?' the other man said. Gabriel looked at him more closely; the name Trey was tattooed on his neck. Gabriel shook his head slightly and watched as Trey twirled the glass pipe in between his fingers, a smile on his face.

‘It’s fucking Baltic in here,’ the one who Gabriel now supposed must be Chris said, rubbing his hands together.

Trey dropped a few rocks of crack into the pipe and sucked in a couple of deep breaths as though he were about to dive into the sea before putting his lips to the edge of the pipe. He held the lighter under the glass bowl and gently rolled the glass stem in his fingers as he slowly drew the milky smoke into his lungs. His expression changed and he sat back in his chair. Chris took the pipe from him. Gabriel noticed that Leanne was watching Emma the whole time, obviously trying to gauge her reaction to this, to see if she was open to it. He saw her shiver again.

‘We should go. It’s freezing in here,’ Gabriel said, stepping closer to his girlfriend. The sun was going down and he didn’t fancy crossing the tracks in the dark, plus he really didn’t want to be here with these people any longer.

‘Killjoy.’ Leanne grinned, her face like a viper.

‘It’s OK. We’ll go in a bit.’ Emma smiled at Gabriel. He noticed how people were different with each other; Emma behaved differently when they were alone, she behaved differently with her family too and she was definitely behaving differently here with Leanne. This behaviour didn’t feel like her, it was a side he hadn’t seen before. A tapping sound echoed against the window as the rain began.

‘It’s starting to chuck it down,’ Gabriel said, looking at Emma hopefully, trying to impart to her his strong desire to leave. She just shifted her gaze away.

‘Why don’t you see if you can warm it up in here?’ Leanne asked him, it was a challenge, a threat maybe; there was something about her that made Gabriel really uneasy and it seemed amplified in here.

Gabriel went to the corner and grabbed the metal waste paper bin that had been left in the signal box. He didn’t want to cause a fuss; maybe his argument with his father earlier had made him extra defensive, maybe he wasn’t thinking straight. He collected some of the rubbish from the floor and piled it in before picking up one of Trey’s lighters from the table and snapping the head off.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Trey said.

Gabriel tipped the fluid from the lighter into the bin and then picked another lighter from the table. He found himself trying to prove something to Leanne; she had a way about her that made him feel impotent, it explained why Emma was the way she was around her.

‘Don’t break them all!’ Chris said, holding the crack pipe in his hands, menace in his voice.

Gabriel lit the edge of a piece of card and threw it into the bin. It ignited immediately. He concentrated on the flames, hoping this part of the evening would be over soon enough. He felt strangely vulnerable. Something terrible was going to happen.

Chapter 2

DS Adrian Miles held his hand out to his partner DS Imogen Grey to help her over the railway sleeper, his other hand lighting up the wet ground with the torch app on his mobile phone. Imogen tutted and stepped over the sleeper without assistance, trudging off ahead. They walked along the side of the tracks until they got to the burnt-out signal box which was illuminated by the lights on the fire truck. There was no more smoke now; it was a dripping carcass of a building.

‘You look nice, Grey,’ Adrian said as his torch beam hit Imogen’s face. He instinctively stepped out of her reach as he complimented her. She had her hair up and lipstick on; tonight must have been a special occasion. He by contrast had been lying on his sofa watching old episodes of *Star Trek* when they got the call.

‘I was out to dinner.’

‘Wow, that sounds so grown-up.’

‘Shut up, Miley.’

The fact was, it was good to see Imogen like this. Her mother had not long woken from a coma and, within a few weeks, had left to go on a ‘restful’ holiday, leaving Imogen with only guilt that she hadn’t protected her, that the attack on her towards the end of their last police case was somehow Imogen’s fault. She was often distracted by it at work, but Adrian knew better than to

mention it, he had to trust that she would know she could confide in him if she needed to.

‘Is Dean all right? Behaving himself?’ Adrian asked, checking there were no uniformed officers listening in. Despite all of Adrian’s predictions to the contrary, Imogen and Dean were still together. Even with Dean’s sketchy history, something he’d apparently assured Imogen was in the past, they had managed to make it work. It wasn’t illegal to date an ex-con but it certainly wasn’t looked on favourably. At some point, they would have to declare it, which would mean even more scrutiny from the higher-ups, something Adrian could do without.

‘He’s good.’ She looked down and smiled. ‘It’s his birthday, so we went out for a curry.’

‘Wise not to subject him to too much of your cooking if you want to keep him around.’

‘It’s not my fault that mushroom risotto got burned,’ she protested.

‘I was impressed, I didn’t know you could burn anything in a microwave, let alone soggy rice.’

A firefighter walked over to them, cutting through the darkness of the night.

‘Looks pretty serious,’ Adrian said. The firefighter nodded. The train station manager was approaching down from the platform with a quickened pace; he had probably been dragged in from home as well.

‘Officers,’ he said, nodding at them both.

‘Follow me,’ the firefighter said, beckoning them towards the ruined signal box. They got to the foot of the building; the wooden staircase was completely gone, as was the entire top floor.

‘Deliberate?’ Adrian asked, pulling out his notebook.

‘We’ve had a lot of trouble with kids and homeless people breaking into this one in the past,’ the station manager offered. ‘Until the investigation is complete we can’t say for sure, but it definitely looks that way. Even though this is old wood it’s a rainy night, and from the calls we got, it escalated to disproportionate levels for what we would expect from a building like this. There does seem to be some evidence of accelerant.’

‘Do you think it’s arson then?’ Adrian asked him.

‘I’m leaning that way. The point of origin seems to be a waste paper bin, but we’ll need to check that out further.’

‘Do you have any CCTV footage?’ Imogen turned to the station manager.

‘We do. My colleague is just retrieving it for you now. It’s a poorly lit area and with the terrible weather the visibility will be even crappier, not to mention the fact that it was actually night when whoever it was came out. It’s possible that when the arsonist was leaving some of the station lights or the lights on the bridge illuminated the area a little better though.’

‘Did they not tell you the main reason you’re here?’ the firefighter asked, looking between them curiously.

‘What do you mean?’ Adrian asked.

‘We found a body.’

Imogen and Adrian looked at each other.

‘You probably should have led with that,’ Imogen said crossly.

‘The fire started in the upstairs part of the building but the body was in the room with the mechanics on the ground floor. Probably male, possibly homeless, but that’s really a wild guess as the body is so badly damaged. It’s most likely he snuck in here for a kip or something. They come into the bottom of the building because there are no windows. It happens all the time. We’ll know more when the investigators have done a proper search and you get your pathologist down to the site to have a look before the body is moved.’

They made their way forwards, the firefighter handed them hard hats although it seemed unnecessary as there was nothing above them anymore, the ceiling and roof had been completely burnt through. Adrian started picking through the rubble of the structure. The floor was burned, the machinery charred black and as their eyes adjusted, they could make out a human-being-shaped pile of debris. The firefighter shone a light at the ground.

The station manager gagged and crumpled forwards at the sight of the body. Imogen looked at Adrian who gave a nod.

‘Show me the CCTV,’ Imogen said to the station manager before following him back out towards the platform, leaving Adrian to deal with the body.

Adrian bent down and looked at the ground. The body was contorted, almost in a foetal position, crisp and delicate, with

obvious fracture points where the entire floor had caved in on top of it, smashing the skull to smithereens. What was previously the floor now lay around the body in charred splinters, the wood had been so dry it had almost entirely burnt away. He shone his torch upwards to see the smouldering hole where the fire had torn through the roof and exposed the inky sky overhead. Back on the ground he noticed debris, rat droppings, chunks of wet, singed wood. It was like staring at a black and white TV, everything in monochrome, various shades of grey. Dark wet ash, light dry ash, everything covered in some variant of grey dust. Even the red-brick walls were blackened with soot.

The crime scene technicians approached and Adrian took a couple of markers, the bright yellow practically glowing against the dirge of this tiny burnt-out structure. He focussed on the shape of the body, the hands shrivelled into claws. Adrian shuddered at the thought of the man, hiding in here from the cold when the fire broke out.

‘How long does it take for a body to get like that?’ Adrian asked the crime scene technician once he’d checked that Imogen had taken the station manager a safe distance away.

‘It really depends on how hot it got in here. It’s a small space and fairly well insulated despite the broken glass upstairs. There’s a lot of metal in here too, which would have added to the intensity of the heat. I spoke to one of the firefighters and he said it was at least forty-five minutes before they made it down here onto the tracks safely. It’s out of view, and although there aren’t many

trains at this time of night, a lot of calls had to be made before they could access the building. It's a tricky spot to get to as well. And who knows how long it was burning before anyone noticed, the CCTV footage should be able to tell you more.'

'Will we be able to get DNA from the body?' Adrian had taken out his notebook and was scribbling as the technician talked.

'I can't say at this stage, I'm sorry. It really depends on a variety of factors. We'll know more when we get the remains back to the lab.'

'Thank you.' Adrian closed his notebook and walked back to find Imogen. He felt strange walking alongside the tracks, remembering his mother's old obsession with the fact that this was probably how he would die. Growing up, their house had backed onto the lines at Exeter St Thomas station, and every time he left the house she would warn him not to play about on the tracks. The trains had been delayed tonight, so he knew he was safe. Still, this felt like an act of betrayal.

Adrian stepped into the railway office and saw Imogen sitting with the station manager, going through the CCTV footage of that night. He went over to them and sat down, wanting a closer look at the screen. They were rewinding back from the fire. Five figures came out of the signal box, two wearing hoodies. They looked like males, probably teenagers. The rain was coming down. Adrian could see a girl with a baseball cap on, but there was no clear shot of her face, and another girl who was wearing a short skirt and had a newspaper covering her head. There was

a young man with her, holding her hand and helping her down the stairs. He was tall, with shoulder-length dark hair obscuring his face and clearly alternative clothing.

‘We’ll never get an ID from that picture.’

Imogen spun around on her chair to face him. ‘There’s not many places for the alternative crowd to go around here, Miley. I think I know where we can start looking.’

Chapter 3

Imogen showed the girl on the door of the nightclub her police ID and was waved forward into the club. She felt a rush of adrenaline as they entered; this was her thing, this was who she used to be. It was hard to rebel against her flighty mother when Imogen was a teen. Irene Grey would waft around wearing bright, multi-layered skirts and cardigans, smoking pot and occasionally flashing the neighbours as an act of protest. When Imogen was small her mother had insisted on dressing her in much the same way. As soon as Imogen could, she'd started wearing a pair of baggy black skater pants and a hoodie, partly to fade into the background, but also to make sure everyone knew that she was nothing like her mother. She would go to the local goth clubs, and her mother became increasingly concerned that she was exhibiting the same mental health issues that she had. The opposite was the truth; Imogen was just trying to pull away from Irene, to become an individual in her own right.

She tugged now at the clip in her hair and let it fall onto her shoulders. For the first time in a long time she felt like a traitor, slightly uncomfortable being here on duty. Here to disrupt the enjoyment rather than take part in it. The goths she had known were all quite anti-authority. She tousled her hair a little and clocked Adrian staring at her curiously. She doubted he had ever set foot in a place like this in his life. Girls in short skirts, corsets,

excessive theatrical make-up. Men in motorcycle masks, tight-fitting clothing and eyeliner. There were a few people who didn't fit into either category at a cursory glance.

'How did you know about this?' Adrian shouted to her above the music.

'I know lots of things. Besides, I was going to come anyway, the band they have on tonight are pretty decent.'

'You like this?'

'Oh yeah, I like this.'

Adrian nodded to the bar; Imogen looked over and saw a tall man waiting to order drinks. He had shoulder-length hair, and was dressed in the same way as the man they had seen on the CCTV footage. He had the same red tartan punk trousers on, also known as bondage trousers, with straps that crossed and clipped to the opposing legs, expensive and distinctive. His hair was tucked behind his ears. Imogen looked him up and down. He looked the right height and build for the man in the video. He turned toward them and met Imogen's gaze, she flushed a little. She composed herself before walking over to him and flashing her ID.

'Can we have a word?' she asked.

The man looked at the ID, he seemed a little confused but not alarmed. He necked his drink and followed them both into the lobby.

'I'm DS Imogen Grey and this is my partner, DS Adrian Miles.'

‘Gabriel Webb.’ He held his hand out, Imogen took it and shook it. He was very direct and seemed both polite and unfazed by this interaction.

‘Can I ask where you were this evening?’

‘With some mates. Around.’

‘We have CCTV of you leaving a signal box.’

‘Right, yeah, I was there.’ He brushed his hair out of his eyes.

‘Who were you with?’ Adrian asked.

‘Why?’ Gabriel Webb narrowed his eyes. He didn’t seem like someone with something to hide.

‘Did you perhaps start a fire inside the signal box?’ Imogen asked, hoping to God he said no. Perhaps he had no idea at all about the man in the room below in the signal box. The repercussions of this were bigger than anyone his age should have to deal with. Despite his height, he had a young face; he couldn’t have been much older than eighteen. She wanted to send him home, before his world got turned upside down. It was always hardest with the young ones.

‘In the bin, yeah, but it burnt out before we left. Who told you that?’

‘Where are your friends now? Are they here?’

‘There’s something you’re not telling me, isn’t there?’ Gabriel’s pale face looked even more ghostly than before as the gravity of the situation started to dawn on him. ‘I’m not implicating anyone else until I know what’s going on.’

‘We’re going to need you to come to the station with us,’

Adrian said gravely. He made eye contact with Imogen, and she knew what he was thinking. They were potentially about to ruin this kid's life.

'I'm going to have to call some officers to come and interview the people here if you won't tell me who was with you,' Imogen said, knowing that the girls in the video's heads were obscured and their clothes generic; if they were here the chance of identifying them was quite small.

'I can't tell you who I was with, I'll come with you but I'm not saying anything about anyone else.'

Imogen felt a weight in her stomach as Gabriel went to tell the girl on the front door where he was going; she was clearly a friend of his. Imogen watched him as he spoke. She didn't want to tell this kid the truth. Yeah, he was a tall guy, but underneath the black eyeliner and sinister-looking clothing he was probably quite insecure. She had known guys like this when she was a teenager herself; it was war paint, a mask, a way to be a part of a world you don't feel like you fit into.

Gabriel Webb sat in the interrogation room facing Adrian. He looked a little less confident than he had before, but he clearly still had no idea what had happened.

'We're not sure if you know this,' Adrian began, 'but earlier tonight, Friday the twenty-sixth of June, after you left the signal box, a fire broke out. It took the firefighters a long time to put it out.'

'Oh, my God!' he said, shifting nervously in his seat.

Adrian tried to read Gabriel; he didn't seem to be hiding anything, but then sometimes the people they had in these rooms were just very good at lying. Adrian wondered if he could trust his own instincts about this young man; was he reading him right or was he being manipulated?

Imogen walked into the room with a glass of water and put it in front of Gabriel before sitting down next to Adrian.

'For the record, DS Grey has re-entered the room,' Adrian said into the tape recorder that was positioned on the table in front of him.

'Tell us what happened, Gabriel,' Imogen said.

Adrian sat back and let his partner take the helm for a moment; she seemed to have a better rapport with the man and that might help them get more honest answers out of him.

'I was out with some friends and we ended up at the signal box.'

'Have you been there before?'

'No, never.'

'Which friends were you with?'

'Does it matter? I already told you I started the fire. No point in anyone else getting in trouble.'

'Why did you start the fire?' Imogen asked.

'It was cold. The rain was pelting down; I didn't know it was going to rain so I wasn't wearing a coat.' He paused, obviously trying to think of how to word his answers. 'One of the girls was cold. It was a metal bin and the fire didn't even last very long.'

‘Go on.’

‘That was it. We left and went to the club to see the band.’

Adrian looked briefly at Imogen, who looked every bit as sombre as he felt.

‘Unfortunately, arson is a pretty big deal, Gabriel,’ Adrian said.

‘Arson? No, it wasn’t that. I wouldn’t do that.’

‘That’s for the judge to decide.’

‘Judge? What do you mean? Are you charging me with arson?’

‘It was an accident.’

Imogen sighed audibly, exhaling and then holding her breath again.

‘There’s something else, I’m afraid,’ she said.

‘If you call my parents they can pay for the damage.’

‘I’m afraid it’s more complicated than that.’ Adrian paused and looked at Imogen. ‘There was a body found in the signal box,’ he said.

The force of Adrian’s words knocked the colour out of Gabriel’s face. ‘What?’

‘There was someone in the room below when the building caught fire. There’s every likelihood it was a homeless man, but we don’t know for sure at this point until there’s been a thorough examination of both the site and the body.’

‘No ... it was just us,’ he said faintly, his chest heaving.

‘Are you all right?’ Imogen asked. Gabriel was shaking; he looked as though he was going to throw up.

‘It might help your case if you tell us who you were with; they

can corroborate your story about the fire.'

'Can you call my parents? I think I need a lawyer or something, I don't think I should say anything else.' His breathing was shallow and laboured. He started to wheeze, fighting to inhale.

'Gabriel, do you have asthma?' Imogen asked him urgently.

He nodded as he struggled with the leather buckled corset around his waist. He looked like he couldn't get enough air.

'Interview suspended at 00:15,' Adrian said as he stopped the recording.

'Help me get him on the floor,' Imogen said.

Adrian helped his partner lower Gabriel onto the ground; he was cumbersome, but they needed him to calm down. He arched his back and stretched his neck, rasping for air.

'Can I help you take that off, Gabriel?' Imogen asked, gesturing to the corset as the teenager nodded, tears falling from his eyes and trickling down the side of his face.

'Do you have any medication on you? An inhaler or something?' Imogen said.

He shook his head.

'What do I do?' Adrian asked.

Imogen pulled at the buckles on Gabriel's cincher until it was undone and yanked it off; he breathed in air greedily and Adrian watched as Imogen stroked his forehead. His breathing seemed to normalise a little.

'You'd better get some help.' Imogen turned to Adrian who tried to hide his surprise at her tenderness; there was something

maternal about the way she was handling Gabriel Webb. He went to the door and called to one of the constables, instructing him to get a doctor.

‘I’m OK,’ Gabriel wheezed. ‘I’m fine, it just happens sometimes.’

‘We’ll get someone to sit with you until you can be checked out by the duty doctor. OK?’

Gabriel started to get up slowly, still breathing in short bursts but much calmer than a few moments previously. Adrian held out a hand to him and helped him stand up. He remembered only too well the feeling of being nineteen; you’re a man but you’re not, he thought. You’re not a child, you’re kind of nowhere. It was a horrible age.

‘What happens now?’ Gabriel sat back down, his eyes glassy and full.

‘Depends on the outcome from the scene of the fire.’

‘Do you understand that if we don’t get to speak to your friends, the people with you at the signal station, then in all likelihood you’re going to go down for this?’ Imogen interjected.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Gabriel, if they determine its arson, then we’re going to have to charge you with manslaughter.’

Adrian stood by his car and lit a cigarette; he had given up on giving up and he felt much better for it. Imogen walked out of the station, pulling her hair back into an updo. She was shaking her head.

‘God, I hate this job sometimes.’ She took the cigarette out of Adrian’s hand and sucked on it before giving it back to him.

‘You believed him then?’

‘Absolutely. Shame it doesn’t matter what I think.’

‘It will matter to him. He liked you, I can tell.’

‘What about his parents? Did Denise get hold of them?’

‘Yeah. They said they’ll come tomorrow. They think a night in a holding cell will do him good.’

‘He seems like a nice kid, though. I feel so bad for him.’ Imogen couldn’t help but feel a pull towards Gabriel, maybe it was just her self-preservation in action because he reminded her so much of herself at that age, before she decided to become a police officer.

‘I’m sure those big sad blue eyes and that cute little cleft in his chin have nothing to do with that.’

‘OK, he is good-looking, but that kind of makes it even worse. I hope he’s strong enough to handle it on remand.’

‘First Dean Kinkaid and now this kid. I think I know what your type is, Grey. Convict.’

‘Piss off, it’s not like that. Don’t be gross. If I was ten years younger, then yeah – he would have been the kind of guy I looked at, but not now. I don’t know,’ she paused, ‘I think he reminds me of me.’

They both stood contemplating for a moment as they shared the remainder of Adrian’s cigarette. Two minutes of silence as they processed what had just happened, and what was most

likely about to happen. It didn't seem as though Gabriel had any intention of saying who the other people were, and there was no way to ID them from the video. Hoodies and miniskirts were standard clothing for anyone under twenty and that was a significant proportion of the population, it would be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

'Anyway, tonight sucked. Are you hungry?' Adrian finally spoke as he put the cigarette out.

'No, not really. I can't help worrying about what's going to happen to him. That kid's going to be eaten alive in prison.'

'What can we do?'

'We can start with identifying that body.'

'Let's get going then. My weekend has been screwed over yet again by Dominic and Andrea, they've taken Tom to London to see a show or something.'

'Again?'

'He'll be sixteen next year, then he can spend his weekends where he wants.'

'And you're sure they're safe?'

'Dominic wants me to know he's got my family, it's not about hurting them, it's about winding me up. I think they're safest where they are for now, until I get some concrete evidence on him. Gary's working on it for me.'

'I'm not sure I could be so calm about it.'

'I'm not sure if calm is the right word. I like to keep busy to keep my mind off it.'

Adrian had been investigating his son's stepfather for around four months now, since Tom had come to him with a suspicion that Dominic was cheating on his mother. While Adrian had managed to disprove the cheating, he'd found out some things he couldn't ignore. Financial irregularities of large sums of money, money that couldn't be explained legally. Until he had proof though he was powerless to act and he couldn't open an official investigation. He had no evidence. Every time he got the chance he would look into Dominic, with the help of Gary Tunney, the forensic computer technician at the police station, who also loved to solve puzzles in his free time. But Dominic was good; so far they hadn't found anything that would stick. A little over two months ago, Dominic had somehow found out that Adrian had been snooping around in his affairs. They would have to be more careful in the future but Adrian wasn't going to give up, he was confident that Gary would get to the bottom of it. The fact that Dominic had threatened Adrian and made it clear to him that he should stop, or his life would get more difficult, was just more incentive to get his family out of there. If not now, then soon. Dominic was going to pay; Adrian just had to make sure he didn't take his whole family down with him.

'I'll call Dean and tell him not to wait up then.'

They walked back into the station for what would undoubtedly be a night of scintillating closed-circuit TV viewing. With any luck, they might be able to get a better angle on Gabriel and his friends, see if they could work out who he was with.

Chapter 4

Gabriel couldn't move his arms. They were pinned down by his sides, his broad shoulders each touching the side of the metal box he was in. He had anticipated a five-minute journey but an accident on Magdalen Street meant that they were stuck for a little while, at least until the cars were moved out of the way. He wanted to stand up, he wanted to go for a walk to stretch his legs. More than that, he wanted to scream.

The windows of the Serco prison transport van – or sweatbox as it was more affectionately known – were blacked out from the outside, but from the inside he could see the people on the streets going about their business. He saw a skater flipping off a hotel step and instantly wished he had his deck, just to feel that freedom. Freedom; something he had never fully appreciated until he was sat in this box. He was being put on remand until his hearing. He tried to focus on his breathing, unwilling to let his asthma get the better of him in here of all places. He didn't even know if they would open the door if he had an attack. If they would even hear him? If they would even bother to help? Instead, he just counted inside his head to make the rising panic go away. He couldn't think about what he had done to get into this situation; the fact was that he was here and he was guilty. Of arson. Of manslaughter.

He had never meant to kill anyone. The words went round and

around his head. He was a killer; he had ended someone's life. He couldn't allow himself to cry. He couldn't be seen to be entering the prison with tears in his eyes. He had a few friends who had done time in Exeter prison, and by all accounts it was grim. Understaffed and overpopulated, the Victorian building that was barely fit for purpose – not in this day and age – still housed well over five hundred prisoners both on remand and serving shorter sentences. And he was about to join them.

At least the police had seemed to believe that he hadn't intended to start the fire; hopefully the judge would too. Every time he closed his eyes, Gabriel imagined what it must feel like to burn alive. Why hadn't they checked the place was empty? Why had he allowed himself to be pushed into something so bloody stupid? He longed for the sound of his parents screaming at each other when they thought he was out of earshot. Anything but this.

The van started moving and Gabriel allowed himself to breathe. He looked outside, wondering if he would ever walk on a street again. He was afraid that he wouldn't even last a week in jail; either the asthma or something worse would get to him. The invisible strap around his chest tightened. One, two, three, four, five. He soaked in as much of the city as the route would allow. The bus station, the pub he went into with Emma sometimes. As they pulled into the prison, Gabriel held his breath again. He had very little idea of what to expect, but he was going to keep his head down, speak when spoken to and keep himself to himself. He was grateful at least for his six foot two inches of height,

hoping that might deter any unprovoked attacks.

The first thing that hit Gabriel was the smell. It was a musty kind of clean. The kind of clean that was masking a multitude of sins. Industrial cleaner that has an unpleasant bite. He tried not to think about it as he stood with the prison officer at the end of a long room that was more like a giant corridor. B-wing. Doors with cross-hatched, reinforced windows in them. A hatch and a big bolt on the outside. *Breathe.*

The wing itself was light and airy, empty at the moment apart from the two men with mops and buckets at either side of the long room. Instinctively he wondered what they did to get put inside when they looked so harmless. Most of the doors that lined the walls of the gallery were open. He wondered what was behind the doors that were closed. There was a vaulted ceiling with skylights, fenced off by a metal barrier, and they were on the second level, a gallery looking down onto a communal area with ping-pong tables and sofas. Above everything was a steel net, presumably to stop people from throwing themselves – or others – over the railings.

‘All right, son?’ The prison officer smiled and touched Gabriel on the shoulder to indicate that he should move forward. Gabriel noted the look of sympathy on the officer’s face and realised he must look terrified. He opened his mouth, stretching his jaw; it had been clenched for so long that it had started to hurt. He settled his face into a more stoic expression, feeling his jaw tightening all over again. He pouted his lips to at least make

his anxiety seem like confidence, looking down his nose as he walked forward with a strong, assertive stride. He couldn't let them see his fear, he couldn't show any weakness. They were about two thirds of the way into the room when the officer stopped.

'Your stuff's already in there. When you hear roll call, make sure you come and stand here again and answer when they call your name. If in doubt, just copy everyone else.'

You'll soon get the hang of it. Just stay calm.

Gabriel considered the room. It was very innocuous with its cream walls and bunk beds. There was a desk and a cupboard each for belongings, and two comfortable chairs against the far wall.

'Thanks,' Gabriel managed to squeeze out. *Thanks for locking me up. Thanks for facilitating my incarceration. Thanks for saving me from myself.*

'Your pad-mate will be back off work duty soon.' The prison officer put his hand on Gabriel's shoulder, giving him a gentle pat, or a nudge maybe. Maybe it meant something else altogether.

That was Gabriel's cue to move from the doorway, to leave the long light corridor of the wing and enter the small space he would occupy for the foreseeable future. At least until he had to appear in court for sentencing – until they decided how much of a risk to society he was. The guard left without closing the door. The idea that anyone could walk in at any moment was not something Gabriel had considered. He had prepared himself to

be locked in, but not for this.

He grabbed his bag from on top of the cupboard. He couldn't tell which bunk was his and so he sat in one of the chairs and waited for his cellmate. He was nervous about conversation. Worried he might say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Upset someone without meaning to. Hopefully his cellmate wouldn't ignore him. He had been counting the words that had come out of his mouth since he had been charged, aware that he had only spoken when he had to, when he was spoken to first. He wasn't sure if it made him feel more or less lonely. He had said fifty-five so far, most of them answering the nurse or counsellor in the screening as they processed him to enter the prison.

Gabriel looked through the bag of clothing his mother had sent in to see that his favourite T-shirt was missing. The Slipknot tour T-shirt that Emma used to sleep in. He hadn't even washed it – he wanted it to smell of her. The rest of his stuff seemed to be there.

'I'm Jason Cole. Who are you?' A man entered the room, bounding straight towards Gabriel with his hand held out. Gabriel stood up awkwardly.

'I'm Gabriel.'

'Well it's good to meet you, Gabriel!'

'Thanks.'

'You been inside before? I'm guessing by the look on your face the answer is no.' Jason sat down on the edge of the bed.

Gabriel stuffed his things back into his bag and put them in

the empty cupboard. He could sort it all out later.

‘Roll call!’ A booming voice came from outside the cell.

Jason nodded Gabriel towards the door and they both stood up. Gabriel was a good few inches taller than Jason, who had on a red shirt and blue jeans. Gabriel was once again feeling out of place in his fully black attire. Jason went outside and stood to the left of the door, and Gabriel followed, trying to remember what they had told him at the induction. So far so good though. Jason didn’t seem to be violent, at least.

As he stepped out of the cell, he looked up and down the wing without moving his head and without making eye contact. He stood to the right of the door as Jason stood to the left. That seemed to be what everyone else was doing.

Another prison officer stood in the centre of the floor below, calling out names from a sheet. His voice carried through the whole of the wing, reverberating off the walls and silencing most of the murmuring inmates. He had some lungs all right. There was no whispering or messing around as the guard reeled off the names and the men responded. Gabriel noted how strange it was that these men, these law-breakers, were all so obedient. He could feel eyes on him but didn’t want to know who was looking at him. He kept his face straight ahead.

‘Webb?’ The guard called finally. There was no hiding anymore. His presence had been announced.

‘Present,’ Gabriel responded. *Fifty-nine words.* He heard a couple of murmurs and wondered why his voice had elicited such

a reaction. He didn't want paranoia to get the better of him, but he felt so alone. He took a cursory glance around before stepping back inside his cell, confirming that he had been noticed.

'Half an hour bang-up then it opens up for a few hours so we can get dinner and kick back,' Jason said. He looked at Gabriel. 'What you in for?'

'I killed someone,' Gabriel responded quietly, not wanting to shock Jason, whose demeanour changed immediately. His casual stance disappeared. His back straightened and Gabriel heard him suck in a breath before smiling and looking down to avoid eye contact with Gabriel. To avoid eye contact with a killer.

Gabriel was big, but he knew he had a young face. Younger than his nineteen years at least. Angelic was how everyone had described him when he was a baby, and that's how he was named. Angel Gabriel. It could have been worse.

Jason grabbed a puzzle book from the top of his cupboard and slid into the lower bunk, facing away from Gabriel. The conversation was over. At least now Gabriel knew which bunk was his.

The officer that had initially shown him to his cell stuck his head around the door. Gabriel looked at his name tag: Barratt.

'Everything all right?'

'Yes thanks,' Gabriel said, getting used to speaking again.

It felt good not to be completely isolated. It's one thing to be deliberately moody and a bit reclusive when you can do what you want, he thought. When you have no other options, it gets old,

fast.

For the first time since Gabriel had entered the cell, the door closed completely. The cell still felt like a room by all accounts; it was kind of how Gabriel imagined university halls to be – a place he'd never had much interest in, much to his parents' disgust. Barratt pulled the latch across and Gabriel heard the thunk of the bolt as it slotted into place. He felt his throat closing. He pulled himself onto the top bunk and tried to concentrate on his breathing again. He didn't want to rely on his medicine in here; he didn't know when he wasn't going to have access to it. Claustrophobia was not something Gabriel had ever experienced before but here it was, the walls closing in on him. There was no way out. The knot in his stomach grew tighter and he tried to distract himself for the twenty-five minutes that remained until the doors unlocked again.

Gabriel opened his eyes to find the door was open. He jumped off the bed and saw Jason was gone from the lower bunk; he assumed he was getting his dinner, at least he hoped he hadn't scared him away on their first day together. He could hear chatter outside the cell and saw people walking past, milling around as though this were all perfectly acceptable. He wished he'd brought a book with him; somehow, it didn't seem like a good idea to touch any of Jason's things. He smoothed down his hair and shook his head a little so that it fell in front of his eyes before reluctantly walking towards the door.

'Hey.' A man with a mop of thick black curls was standing in

his doorway. He was about as tall as Gabriel but he was bulkier; not fat, but not shredded either.

‘Hi.’ Gabriel folded his arms and stood by the door, just inside as though some invisible force-field would protect him if something bad should happen.

‘I’m Solomon Banks, I’m two cells down.’ The man pointed to the left of him. ‘Everyone calls me Sol.’

‘I’m Gabriel.’

‘Hi Gabe.’ A big smile spread across Sol’s face. It was warm and friendly-looking, but Gabriel had already been warned that in prison everyone is out to get you. The police had told him, the duty solicitor, the nurse. They had all told him to watch himself, whether to scare him or give him a heads-up he didn’t know. *Everyone is just looking out for themselves.* ‘If you grab your bowl and stuff I’ll take you down to the servery,’ Sol continued. ‘The food’s not great but it’s not too bad either.’

‘Thanks.’ Gabriel was hungry. Maybe he needed to take a chance with this Solomon guy. Surely it was better than walking into the unknown by himself. He hoped his instinct about Sol was right because he genuinely seemed OK. He wondered what he was in for; he imagined he’d be wondering the same thing about everyone he was going to meet in the foreseeable future. The duty solicitor had explained to him that a remand prison was a mixed bag with a lot of traffic. Some of the sentences were much harsher than others, from petty theft to manslaughter. Some of the inmates were just waiting to be sentenced and moved on.

Gabriel grabbed his things and stepped onto the wing, crossing the threshold from his sanctuary into the fray. It was different to when he had arrived just a short while earlier. Again, he noticed the smell. The powerful odour of the cleaner had been replaced with the smell of men. The taste of sweat, both old and new, hit the back of Gabriel's throat. He could smell that horrible tar soap he remembered his grandad using.

There were men everywhere. Booming laughter and heated discussions. Mumbled conversations, profanities and platitudes. A cacophony that reminded him of the changing rooms at secondary school, another place where he'd been at the bottom of the food chain, at least until he'd grown to well over six feet tall. He kept his head down as he followed Sol to the servery. They passed some big white men with shaven heads on the way down the narrow metal stairs onto the lower level. They walked past the ping-pong tables, Sol calling out hello to several of the players.

Then came the showers. Gabriel was horrified when he noticed that you could see inside; there were four men in there, showering completely naked and no one was batting an eye. There was a small wall that came to about hip-height on Gabriel, just to allow for a little modesty. Although forsaking his freedom was something that Gabriel had resigned himself to, he hadn't considered the complete lack of privacy. Nothing was his anymore. He was part of this organism, part of this system that he had to adjust to. The realisations about his new life were coming

thick and fast for Gabriel as he walked over to the long queue for dinner. He stood behind Sol. One thing he had also noted on his walk was the authority Sol seemed to command, or if not authority then maybe just respect. Not fear though, definitely not fear.

‘You’re in with Jason?’

‘Yeah,’ Gabriel said, still struggling to find his voice.

‘If I were you, I’d stay out of his way.’

‘Is he dangerous?’ Gabriel tried to sound calm, knowing full well that tonight he would be locked in a room with Jason for a very long time.

‘No, but he is stupid,’ Sol whispered as he nodded hello to one of the other inmates, a young man with a ginger beard and a crew cut. Gabriel watched as the man’s eyes travelled up his body. He shivered involuntarily.

‘Stupid?’

‘Never borrow and never lend. Rule one. Especially if you don’t have permission. When all you have in the world is twenty things, suddenly those twenty things take on a whole new importance. Jason took something of importance to someone. He’s going to get a kicking and you probably shouldn’t be there when it happens.’

‘Shouldn’t you tell the guards?’

‘Rule two: don’t tell the guards anything. Not many people in here get treated worse than a grass.’

‘Gotcha.’

‘If you see something happening then leave, that’s my advice,’ Sol said. ‘It’s hard but in here you have to look out for yourself. That’s what everyone else is doing.’

Gabriel stared into the cottage pie on his tray. The mashed potato was white and shiny, with beads of liquid on the surface as though it had been sweating. It was watery and soft. There was an orange tinge to the mince that looked both unnatural and unappetising. He scooped some of the mixture onto his spoon; it was mushy but also unwilling to separate as he pulled the spoon away. The mashed potato hung like mucus as he moved it towards his lips. He was so hungry, he put the food in his mouth; it was warm but not hot. He tried to imagine each mouthful as though it were something else entirely, which got more difficult as it got colder. It sank to the bottom of his stomach like sand. Without warning, Gabriel gagged and the horrible potato decided to come back out; he rushed to the bin in the corner of the servery and threw up. He heard laughter and looked up to see the men on the table opposite were watching him. One of them was the young ginger man. His eyes were burning into Gabriel. Suddenly, he wasn’t hungry anymore.

Roll call.

Gabriel walked back to his cell and stood in position outside the door. Jason was nowhere to be seen.

‘Cole!’ the prison officer said for the fourth time, this time looking up in Gabriel’s direction. Gabriel’s discomfort was magnified as three other screws walked briskly towards him.

Everyone was looking. Gabriel felt the colour draining from his face. He tried to look tall, not vulnerable. He tilted his chin back and stood up straight, shoulders back. It was the kind of stance he would have used in a club as he surveyed the room, everyone trying to look more badass than anyone else.

Gabriel looked at the names of the officers. Marcus Hyde, Kyle Johnson and Steve Barratt.

‘Where’s Jason?’ Barratt asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Gabriel answered. *Eighty-two words.*

‘You don’t know? When was the last time you saw him?’ Hyde barked at him, just inches away from Gabriel’s face. Gabriel was taller and it felt strange having this smaller man shouting at him. He hated having to ignore it, to take the anger. It went against everything he was. He wasn’t violent, but he was proud. Although he had no reason to be proud anymore.

‘In the cell. Before dinner.’

‘We’re going to need a little more information than that,’ Hyde pushed.

‘When I woke up I went to dinner, he wasn’t there when I left or when I came back.’

‘Is that true?’ Barratt stepped in, clearly playing good cop to Hyde’s aggression.

‘I swear.’

‘Lockdown!’ Hyde shouted, his voice reverberating through the wing. The prisoners groaned and moved back into their cells. From what Gabriel could tell, this seemed like something that

happened quite often.

Hyde left the room and Barratt seemed to be waiting until he was out of earshot before he spoke to Gabriel again.

‘If you had nothing to do with this I suggest you keep your nose out of it,’ Barratt whispered.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean Jason upset the wrong people and those people are not going to get caught.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because you’re new. We see a lot of the same faces in here over and over again. I’ve never seen you before so I guess that means maybe you aren’t such a bad guy. Keep your nose clean and your time in here will go a lot faster.’

‘Keep my nose clean how?’

‘Just don’t get mixed up with the wrong people. Keep yourself to yourself. Use your nous.’

‘What’s happened to Jason?’

‘We’ll probably find him pretty soon, beaten up if we’re lucky, dead if we’re not.’

‘If you’re lucky?’

‘You cannot imagine the bureaucratic nightmare of finding a dead inmate.’ He walked to the door and pulled it closed with a final warning before he locked it. ‘Keep your head down.’

Barratt left. Gabriel walked over to the door and looked out of the strip of vertical glass to see what was going on. There was a distinct lack of panic on the wing. Everything was

routine. Everyone sat patiently in their rooms, the prison officers checking each cell individually before closing it and locking the occupants in. It was barely 7 p.m. and they were done for the night.

Gabriel was torn between relief that he was alone and a concern that something terrible had happened to his cellmate. He watched as two officers ran past his door; they had obviously found something. He saw nothing except the faces of his fellow inmates, pressed up against the glass of their own doors, also trying to find out what was going on. Resignedly, Gabriel took a book from on top of Jason's cupboard. He had a feeling his cellmate wouldn't be needing it tonight.

Chapter 5

Adrian was watching DI Fraser speaking to their new DCI. Jonathan Fraser seemed visibly relieved at the fact that he was no longer acting DCI, as he was better suited to taking orders than giving them, and everyone knew it, himself included. DCI Mira Kapoor was a completely new face, brought in to battle the ongoing allegations of corruption within Exeter Police. She was a PR wet dream for the district with her exemplary record and connections in the press. Fraser signalled for Adrian to come over.

‘DI Fraser speaks very highly of you,’ DCI Kapoor said as she shook Adrian’s hand.

‘Ma’am.’

‘Looking forward to working with you, DS Miles,’ she said as she let go of his hand.

‘Thank you.’

‘DS Miles is investigating the fire down at the signal box four nights ago,’ Fraser said. ‘They’re trying to identify the body.’

‘Any luck?’

‘No missing persons, we asked around the homeless community.’ Adrian sighed. ‘If someone *is* missing, no one has noticed yet. As you can imagine, it’s proving very difficult.’

‘What do the forensics say?’

‘No DNA, it seems the floor collapsed onto the burning body

and the damage sustained to both the skull and the rest of the body means we can't get a match on dental records either. We really don't have much to go on.'

'Well, keep going. We're being watched.' She bowed slightly and nodded towards the desk sergeant, Denise Ferguson, who was standing next to Adrian's desk, pointing him out to a young woman with a pea-green satchel who was standing next to her. 'Excuse me.'

Both Adrian and Fraser watched DCI Kapoor walk away. Adrian couldn't help wondering if she was on the level; he had learned the hard way that power and corruption go hand in hand. She was from outside the county which was a promising start. He was at least a little hopeful that she wasn't being controlled by Dominic, who seemed to have his hands on everybody's strings.

'She seems nice?' Fraser said, his voice getting higher at the end. A hint of optimism in the form of a question, as though it were more of a request than a statement. At least Adrian wasn't the only one who was concerned.

Adrian rolled his eyes and headed back towards his desk. He knew better than to be optimistic, anything could happen and he wasn't about to put his trust in anyone just yet. Not after everything they had been through; he would be an idiot if he did.

Denise Ferguson smiled as he approached, as did the woman with the green bag. But hers wasn't a friendly smile, it was a knowing smile and it immediately made him suspicious.

'The DCI has asked that you take care of this young lady,

Adrian. She's a freelance journalist doing a piece on the dangers posed to the escalating numbers of homeless people in Exeter. Wants to know about the identification of the man in the fire.'

'What?' Adrian looked back and the DCI smiled at him; he was missing having Fraser as his boss already.

'Play nice.' Denise smiled before tottering off back to her desk.

'DS Miles, nice to meet you.' He held out his hand to the young woman. She stared at him for a few seconds too long. He hated journalists but he knew the department had a lot of damage to repair, damage which he felt at least partially responsible for. He would play along for now, until he figured her out.

'Lucy Hannigan. Nice to meet you too.' She ignored the gesture and sat down. Adrian detected a tone to her voice that was bordering on sarcasm. He dismissed it as paranoia and his general mistrust of the press. 'I wasn't even sure anyone would be investigating this man's death,' she continued. 'Presumably it was a man.'

Adrian pulled out the pictures of the fire and placed them on the desk in front of her.

'That's about all we know for sure at this point. The building having collapsed on him hasn't helped at all.'

'Is it just you working on this?'

'Me and my partner, DS Grey.'

'I think I read that she got shot last year. Is that right?'

'It is. Good memory.' He wasn't about to elaborate if that's

what she wanted, he wasn't going to give her any more fuel for her fire; this was about containment and nothing else.

'Oh yeah. I have a great memory.' There was that tone again.

'Well, when my partner arrives we'll be heading down to the food bank to see if they have any knowledge of anyone that might be missing. So far, it's a bit of a mystery. We're not even sure if it's a homeless person, but it seems like the most likely scenario at this point.'

'Good job you're a detective then, isn't it?' She was definitely being weird with him.

'Sorry, have we met before? You seem to have some kind of issue with me?'

'No wonder they gave you a badge.' She smiled.

Adrian could tell that he looked puzzled. She seemed to be amused by his confusion. He was racking his brain but he couldn't place her. Which could only mean one thing. He concentrated for a second on her lips, curled ever so slightly into a smirk. There was something familiar about her ... something intimate.

'Did we ...?' He tailed off awkwardly.

'Ironical really that I should get stuck with you now. I have to be honest, if you don't even recognise me that casts some serious doubts over your ability to do your job.'

He saw her again in his mind, a fragment of a memory, her lying beneath him, his hands on her body, his mouth on her skin. It was still a little hazy.

‘What did I miss?’ Imogen slammed her bag on the table and bursting the tension.

‘Miss Hannigan is a freelance reporter,’ Adrian said, flushing red, grateful for Imogen’s interruption. ‘We’ve been asked to brief her on the body in the signal box.’

‘It’ll be a short briefing to be honest. We’re kind of stuck at the moment.’

‘So I hear.’ Lucy Hannigan reached into her bag and pulled out a business card. ‘This lady does a lot of charitable work with the homeless in the area, she might be able to help you out. I’ve written my number on the other side, in case you don’t have it already.’ She looked pointedly at Adrian. What was he missing?

She put the card on the table and stood up.

‘Thank you, we’ll check that out right away.’ Adrian picked the card up, looking at it to see if it sparked anything. He still couldn’t remember the exact circumstances under which he’d met Lucy; he knew it was a couple of years ago, and she looked completely different now. He hoped it came back to him before he bumped into her again.

‘I’ll be in touch. I’d like to follow the investigation. I don’t suppose there’s any chance I can get a copy of those pictures, is there?’

‘I’ll see what I can do. I’ll have to clear it with the DCI.’ Adrian said.

‘Thank you. Good *seeing* you again, Adrian.’ She was being sarcastic. Adrian’s face felt hot.

Adrian and Imogen watched her leave.

‘Do you know her?’ Imogen turned to him and asked, her eyebrows knotted in confusion.

‘I think I probably do.’ Adrian cringed. He changed the subject before she pushed any further. ‘Where have you been? You’re normally here first.’

‘I was talking to my mother. They’re in Crete at the moment.’

‘Is she well enough for that?’ Adrian sounded concerned.

Imogen sighed. ‘The doctor says rest is what she needs, it’s probably good that she’s in a different setting, having people wait on her hand and foot.’

‘Did you speak to Elias? Did he say how your mother was doing?’

Her parents were together in Crete; it was a strange thought. She had never known her father and suddenly almost thirty years later they were back together, a man whose name she hadn’t even known growing up. Her mother had always kept him a secret and she had accepted it, but because of his apparent involvement in a case she was working on, it had all come out earlier this year and now here he was. She hadn’t gotten used to the idea of having a father yet. Imogen had asked him if they could get to know each other slowly, but the truth was she didn’t want any part of it. She had managed this long without him. Her mother was finally reunited with the man she’d lost, but as far as Imogen was concerned, he was a stranger. Finally learning his identity had been a huge shock that she just wasn’t prepared for.

‘He’s making sure she’s taking all her medicine, their cabin is top of the line so she’s really comfortable.’ She paused and took a deep breath before speaking again. ‘When he comes back he wants me to meet his children, and grandchildren. They don’t know about me yet, he said he wanted to talk to me about it first but he doesn’t want any more secrets.’

‘Are you going to meet them?’

‘I’ve been an only child to a single parent my whole life, I’ve never known anything different. To go from that to having three younger brothers and a bunch of nieces and nephews ... I don’t know if I’m ready for all that just yet.’

‘Then tell him to wait.’

She shook off some imaginary burden, jingled her car keys and started towards the exit. ‘Enough about my crap anyway, Miley. We should go see if there are any more cameras around the nightclub after we speak to this charity lady, see if we can work out who Gabriel Webb was with that night. The only camera they had in the club was pointed at the till and he always went to the bar alone.’

‘I don’t know why he just won’t tell us. Who is he protecting?’

‘A girlfriend of course.’

‘You sound very sure about that. Did his parents say anything? Do they know who he was going out with?’

‘No, they don’t really seem to know much about him at all. They don’t seem to care either,’ she said as she opened the door for Adrian. She had spoken to his father on the phone and his

reaction to the arrest was almost a gloat, followed by a comment on how it might make him grow up eventually.

‘Well I know how that goes. My dad was only ever interested in drink and women. At least for the first half of my life, before he got into the harder stuff.’

‘I don’t think that’s Mr Webb’s problem.’

‘It’s all the same though, isn’t it? Selfishness. Since having Tom I can’t imagine it, I can’t imagine putting myself or my pride before him, ever. I don’t understand it.’

‘How does that poem go? “They fuck you up, your mum and dad ...”’

‘Poetry was never really my thing.’

‘You surprise me.’ She raised her eyebrows before getting in the car. She thought about her own parents in relation to the poem, how all of their choices had impacted her life, made her who she was. Another line sprang to mind: *Man hands on misery to man*. Never a truer word was spoken.

Chapter 6

Imogen rang the doorbell to the STREETWIZE charity HQ, a disused clothing shop in Exeter's Sidwell Street, next to a kebab shop Adrian had visited many times before after a drink in town. Adrian walked around the building and found a side door. He banged on it. They heard some movement, followed by the sight of a woman in a dressing gown opening the door. Her face was flushed red and her eyes were swollen and puffy. She coughed uncontrollably the moment she started to speak.

'Hi, I'm DS Grey and this is DS Miles. Are you the lady that runs the STREETWIZE charity?' Imogen asked when the woman had stopped.

'I am. My name is Claire Morgan. Sorry, I'm just getting over the flu. Come in, but I'd keep my distance if I were you.'

They went inside, to a small living room with a two-seater sofa and a coffee table strewn with little balls of screwed-up tissues. There was a palpable taste of eucalyptus in the air where copious amounts of Vicks had obviously been applied. Imogen was hit by the sheer heat of the room. The lady pulled her dressing gown around her tighter, oblivious to the heat.

'We're investigating the fire in the signal box up at Central Station,' Adrian said.

'I saw that on the news. What's it got to do with me?'

'Well I don't know if you saw, but we found the remains of a

male in the room; we think he was seeking shelter from the rain in there. It seems quite probable that he was homeless,’ Imogen said.

Claire Morgan’s hand went up to her mouth and Imogen saw the clear look of distress in her eyes.

‘Do you know how many homeless there are in the city?’ Adrian asked.

‘I used to but the numbers are always growing. It’s getting a lot less ... personal.’

‘Is anyone missing, to your knowledge?’

‘It’s hard to know when someone is missing,’ Claire said. ‘Sometimes people just want to be alone. Sometimes people move on, sometimes they get moved on. There can be a variety of factors why they wouldn’t be around anymore. Over the last few months I would say there’s a couple of people I haven’t seen in a long time. But there are new faces too. As you can imagine, it’s a very transient community.’

‘Do you keep records of the people who pass through your charity?’ Imogen asked.

‘No, I don’t. Some people are homeless by choice, and I think it’s only fair to respect that choice and respect their privacy.’

‘And what is it you do here exactly?’

‘People donate money and the money buys supplies for the homeless. So, if you wanted to donate thirty pounds, I would put together a pack of a sleeping bag, a thermal blanket and some protein bars or something like that. Then when people come in

and ask for help, I can give that to them. It's not much, but it's all I can do.'

'It's a lot more than most people do.' Imogen smiled at her, feeling guilty that she didn't do more.

'I was homeless myself once,' Claire said. 'Not through choice. I was lucky that people helped me and eventually I got myself back on track. Most people genuinely try not to think about it. It's as if they think about it, it might happen to them – as if it's somehow contagious. So they actively choose to ignore it.'

Imogen pulled out a card and handed it to the woman. 'Please call us if you hear anything.'

'I will.' She smiled and paused as though she was thinking for a moment. 'It's good to see you're taking it seriously.'

'One more thing, if you don't mind.' Adrian stepped in. 'Do you know of anyone who used to sleep in that signal box? Or have you heard of anyone who maybe hung out there?'

'The only one I can think of is a man called Bricks,' Claire said slowly. 'But the last I heard he had been arrested and put in prison. He had some mental health issues – he tried to rob the post office last year. He's spent his whole life in and out of the system in one way or another.'

'You don't happen to have a picture of him, do you?'

Claire frowned and shook her head. 'No, I'm sorry, I don't.'

'OK, Claire, thank you for your time. We'll see ourselves out,' Imogen said, not wanting to make the poor woman stand up again.

‘Feel better,’ Miles said as they pulled the door closed.

Imogen was glad to be outside again, out of Claire Morgan’s house which seemed to be an incubator of sorts, the air so hot and thick you could feel yourself getting sicker with every passing moment. She breathed in heartily, ignoring the myriad of smells coming from the industrial wheelie bins in the alley adjacent to the charity.

‘Never thought I would be grateful for the smell of old kebabs.’

‘Come on, a nice doner with a big salad and chilli tomato sauce is one of your five a day!’

‘You disgust me.’ She smiled and walked on ahead.

Chapter 7

The prison bed wasn't comfortable. The blanket was itchy and the pillow may as well not have been there at all. At least there was a mattress – something that hadn't been in the police holding cell. Gabriel's eyes were closed as he tried hard to block out his surroundings. He thought of Emma and her white skin. She wore talcum powder instead of foundation to make it even whiter and when they would kiss he could taste it on the edge of her lips. He imagined her lips on his and realised he was holding his breath. He couldn't ask her to wait for him. It would possibly be weeks until he got a trial date and the sentence he was likely to receive would mean that it would be foolish to hope that she could put her life on hold. They had been apart for nine days now and already he found himself giving up on the idea that he would be with her again. Without that hope he didn't know what else he had to hold onto. He'd had relationships before, but this was different. She was the one. They just fit together. He couldn't imagine never seeing Emma again; his stomach hurt at the thought of it.

He found his mind returning to that day. Why had he not checked the building before starting the fire? Why had he even gone there in the first place? He deserved this punishment. He had taken someone's life.

He was grateful for the darkness. His eyes were so sore from the air in here; it was noxious, unclean and unfiltered. He sucked

in a breath hard as he tried to fill his body with clean air. Any air. He gulped to try and stop the tears that refused to stay beneath the surface any longer. Ready to burst from his bloodshot eyes.

Surely this was all a big mistake? Prison? He couldn't be here. This couldn't be real. Just over a week ago, he and Emma had been making plans for the summer. Everything they had talked about was now gone. No going back to college or work or holidays. No more hope. No future. Or at the very least, a future he hadn't accounted for and most certainly didn't want. This would never go away. It couldn't. Someone had died because of him. Someone had lost their father, brother, son – all because of Gabriel's stupidity.

He couldn't feel sorry for himself, but he could feel anger. The numbness inside had gone. He had spent so long focussing on how to behave and making sure he didn't upset anyone that he hadn't allowed himself to feel anything. His eyes no longer stung and he realised he was crying. Thank God he was alone.

Gabriel turned on his side and drew his knees up to his chest. The release of pressure was immense; he could feel himself letting go and breathing for what seemed like the first time in a week. Tears coming until there were no more. The short burst of emotion had calmed him down. His breathing normalising, he drifted into thoughts of Emma, wishing he had that T-shirt so he could at least inhale her scent.

That's when he noticed the light. A break in the darkness. His heart stopped as he heard the sound of metal against metal. The

bolt sliding across and his door opening, followed by shuffling and quiet footsteps. Should he hold his breath or pretend to be asleep? Should he turn and look? He balled his hand into a fist, ready to punch anyone who touched him. No one had said anything to him when he was arrested, but he knew what they had all been thinking. It had been his first thought when he'd been told he was going to prison. Prison rape was a joke to most people. *Don't drop the soap*. It had stopped being funny the second the prison gates opened and the van pulled inside.

Gabriel heard whispering in the room now, but the sound of his exaggerated heartbeat in his ears made it impossible to discern the words. This was the most vulnerable he had ever felt in his life. This was worse than the strip search, which at least had taken place in the daylight. This was worse than using the servery for the first time, shoulder to shoulder with the unknown, eyes all over him. He didn't recognise the whispered voices but there were more than one. It was becoming clear that they weren't here for him though. They were going through Jason's things. Taking them away. He heard them toss the mattress aside and check underneath it. What had Jason done? What had happened to him? Whatever it was, Gabriel hadn't heard Jason's name spoken among the other inmates in the nine days since he had gone. He didn't want to get himself in trouble by bringing it up, but he found it very odd how quickly the disappearance was accepted. Why wasn't anyone else curious? The lack of curiosity was more upsetting to Gabriel than Jason's unexplained departure.

When Gabriel was sure he was alone, he opened his eyes. The room was dark again, silent once more. He allowed his sight to adjust before turning over in his bed. He wanted to see what had been taken. He moved as though he were still asleep, eyes open a sliver. Everything belonging to Jason was gone, the cupboard empty, door open. The books and pictures on the wall had vanished. It was though he had never been there.

Chapter 8

Imogen knocked on the door of the church and pushed lightly against it. It swung wide open. The building inside looked empty. She had never been a religious person but she found the church quite calming in itself; the well-worn wooden seats, the dancing light from the stained-glass windows, the smell of incense and burning candles. It reminded her of her childhood; her mother was always burning incense and leaving candles lit through the night. It was a miracle there had never been an accident. She thought of her mother, painting by candlelight and she knew that was why she liked churches: they reminded her of her mum, the peaceful mother that would quietly paint in the half-light and not the manic mother that would continually forget to collect her from school.

‘Hello?’ she called out tentatively.

Adrian had no such compunction and walked down the aisle and up towards the altar.

‘Hello?’ His voice echoed hers. Seconds later a door opened to the side of the altar and a priest emerged.

‘I’m Father Berkeley. How can I help you?’

Imogen joined Adrian as the priest approached, they both pulled out their IDs and the priest’s smile got a little tighter.

‘We’re conducting an investigation. We heard that you have a lot of homeless people in and out of here. We just wondered

if you had noticed anyone missing recently?’ Imogen said, as Adrian wandered off towards the candle bank, the tiny shine of the tea lights burning away even when no one was there.

‘It doesn’t really work like that,’ Father Berkeley told them politely, clearly already eager for them to leave. ‘People come and people go.’

‘Do you know a man called Bricks?’ Imogen asked him.

‘Yes, Bricks came here sometimes. He was a strange one. I occasionally invite people to eat with me. He came and had dinner a couple of times but I didn’t invite him back a third time.’

‘Why was that?’

‘He was quite unpleasant and made me feel uncomfortable. You know when someone has a darkness about them? I imagine you get something similar in your line of work, like an instinct about people.’

‘When was that, sorry?’ Imogen ignored the priest’s extraneous comments, unwilling to engage in a conversation with him about the similarities between their line of work.

‘Probably around a month ago. He had a bit of money on him. I had to ask him to leave because he was quite rude to one of my parishioners, used the “c” word.’ The priest shook his head. ‘I threatened to call the police and he went off. I haven’t seen him since then.’

‘A month ago?’ Adrian looked at Imogen and pulled out his phone. This was news to them.

‘Do you have any idea who he hung out with? Do you have a

photo of him?’ Imogen said to the priest.

‘No I don’t, he was always a bit antisocial, never came to any of the church gatherings for the homeless. I don’t think he liked me. You can’t like everyone though, can you?’

‘Indeed,’ Imogen said. ‘Thank you.’

The priest nodded and went into a back room. Imogen turned to see Adrian putting money into the collection box; as she watched him, he picked up a candle and lit it, placing it in the tiered metal candle holder. She thought he might even be praying for a moment before he turned to look at her.

‘Anything?’

‘Nope. But he obviously wasn’t in prison a month ago. We need to get Gary on the case. What are you doing?’

‘What does it look like?’

‘I didn’t think you were into all that.’

‘I’m just lighting a candle, Grey, calm down.’

‘I think we’ve known each other long enough for you to know that telling me to calm down is a bad idea.’

‘Why don’t you light one?’

‘Why would I do that? I’m not Catholic.’

‘You just do it for yourself, to remind yourself of the people you care about,’ Adrian said. ‘It just feels good.’

‘Who would I do it for?’ she said. Her mind immediately went to Dean, followed by a quick burst of shame for not thinking of her mother first.

‘You could do it for your mum; you’re already thinking about

her.'

'That's not going to help her though, is it?' Imogen's mother Irene had never gone for more than a week without her. Now she was away with a man Imogen didn't even know, in another country.

'No, but it might help you.'

'Fine.' Imogen wasn't sure who she was more concerned for. Irene for being with a strange man, or her newly found father Elias, who might disappear altogether again after spending so much time with Irene. After realising how unstable she was.

Adrian pulled out another pound coin and put it in the collection box. Imogen lit a candle and placed it next to Adrian's, while she desperately tried to stay focussed on thinking about her mother. That was how it worked, wasn't it? Bizarrely, she did feel better.

'Who did you light yours for?' she asked him.

'You.'

'Me? What's wrong with me?'

'The age-old question, eh?'

'Seriously – why?'

'Because you've got a lot going on right now, Grey.' His expression was kind. 'Plus, I'm not actually allowed to say anything nice to you for fear of you knocking my block off.' They stared at each other for a moment.

'Let's go, Miley. We've got work to do, we need to find out who the body in the signal box belonged to, and how long Bricks

has been out of prison,' she said, conceding that it was nice to have someone in her corner that she trusted. She knew she gave Adrian a hard time, but she got the impression he liked it that way.

Chapter 9

Gabriel sat in the waiting room outside the mental health nurse's office. He was disturbed by the fact that he was actually looking forward to it, looking forward to speaking to someone in private without the fear of something terrible happening. Apart from mealtimes, Gabriel didn't see much of anyone else, especially now that Jason was gone, forgotten, and it didn't seem like he would be coming back. Sol would walk past every now and then and knock but that was as much human contact as he'd had since being inside. So far, he had witnessed three fights break out, all minor, but still with an intensity that threatened to spread among the other inmates and cause a much bigger problem.

Gabriel had carefully studied the prison officers to see which ones he needed to be on guard with. The officer who had escorted him here, Hyde, seemed to be the most volatile of the bunch. His bloodshot eyes were disengaged, he always looked tired and was constantly rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands. How long before you got burnt out in a job like this? Gabriel wondered how many years he had worked here. He thought about all the men he must have seen come and go and then come back again. Who was really in prison here? Most of the prisoners here would do three years at most and then they got to go home, wherever that was, and forget. The unlucky ones like Gabriel would get moved to a different prison after sentencing. Not everyone came back,

not everyone reoffended. Hyde, however, had been here longer than most of the other guards, he seemed to be the one that they turned to when things went south. He stared at these same walls as the prisoners every day, locked in the same buildings, leaving only to go home and sleep in his bed at night before returning again in the morning.

‘Come in,’ the nurse called from inside. Natalie Barnes was the mental health nurse provided to various facilities in the area. She visited this prison twice a week but this was Gabriel’s first visit with her; he was nervous, but looking forward to spending time with a female. The complete absence of women in the prison was something nobody had prepared him for and he hadn’t really considered it until he’d been faced with it.

Gabriel stood up and went in, sitting himself down in the chair next to her desk. She nodded to Hyde to leave them alone and he closed the door.

‘How are you doing, Gabriel? Just want to check and see how things are.’

‘OK.’

‘This is your first offence?’

‘It is.’

‘How do you think you’re adjusting to the routine?’

‘OK.’

‘Have you made any friends yet?’

‘Not really.’

‘Time goes a lot slower when you’re on your own, you know.’

It's important you make a connection in here if you can. It can help with the day to day.'

'I'll keep that in mind,' he said reluctantly, not comfortable with conversation yet.

'What are you missing most about the outside world?'

'Everything?' He half-laughed at the stupidity of the question. Freedom, freedom is what he missed the most.

'I mean one thing. What one thing do you miss the most? Your parents? Your girlfriend? Your dog?'

'I don't have a dog; my parents have washed their hands of me and I don't think my girlfriend is my girlfriend anymore.'

'There must be something.'

'To be perfectly honest with you, I miss walking. Just going outside and walking wherever I want. It's that simple. And music I guess, I miss listening to music. I've never really been one to watch TV.'

'Did they not tell you that you can buy a radio through the canteen?'

'No?'

'It will only be a basic thing, but maybe that will help.'

'Thank you.' Gabriel was excited for the first time in a week; the concept of a radio giving him an unexpected burst of hope.

'OK, well I'll check on you again next week. Please – do think about what I've said and try to make some friends.'

Gabriel stood up and Hyde opened the door. Back to the cell. He was surprised at how quick the meeting had been. Was it

because he had said all the right things? If he had said he needed help, would they have listened? The whole thing felt like an exercise in box ticking, no one really cared if he was coping or not.

Bang-up again, thirty minutes in the cell to think about his meeting with the nurse, to think about what she'd said and how he should be making friends. He was lonely, and left alone with his thoughts he knew it wouldn't be long before he slipped into a rut of despair; he needed to trust someone, he needed to at least try.

Gabriel was working out in his cell at every opportunity he could get. The outside facility had been closed due to constant outbreaks among the inmates and the fact that on two occasions a drone had dropped suspect packages into the exercise yard. The prison was in the process of appealing for funds to stop this kind of thing. In the thirty minutes 'bang-up' time, Gabriel had worked his way to over a hundred press-ups in less than a week, marginal gains, adding an extra five onto every other set he did. When he'd arrived in jail, he'd barely been able to do a quarter of that without the asthma niggling at him. He figured his breathing was like any other muscle that needed to be stretched, and so he did ten rounds of twenty press-ups a day, pausing for breath in between.

He was just finishing up when the doors unlocked.

Roll call.

He noticed less and less people looking at him during roll call, which was a blessing. He was no longer the new guy, no

longer unpredictable and unknown, he hadn't done anything rash or exciting and so now he was no more interesting than anyone else. He sometimes wondered if they even knew he was there. Beside his brief interactions with Sol, everyone else stayed away from him. He would slip out and then back in without anyone so much as batting an eyelid. Just the way he wanted it. Roll call was over and he went back inside his cell.

'Webb?' Barratt said from the doorway.

Gabriel stood up immediately.

'Yes?'

'I believe you wanted one of these?' Barratt held out a box with a brand-new radio in it. For the first time in a week, Gabriel smiled.

Chapter 10

Adrian walked along his road, past Uncle Mac's corner shop. The orange and grey tones of dusk were settling into daylight. He hadn't been in the shop for a long time, not since they had connected it to a human-trafficking operation four months ago, an operation that was still under investigation. The place had been stripped and new management had taken over, but he still couldn't bring himself to go inside. He thought about his old friend Eva, the girl who had worked in the shop, and wondered if he would ever see her again. The thought of it filled him with anxiety; seeing her again would force him to confront the guilt he felt. When he thought of all the time they spent talking, she could have told him what had happened to her, that she had been trafficked, that she was there against her will. He wanted to blame her for not saying anything but the truth was he should have known something was very wrong. These days, he walked to the nearest supermarket on the main road for his necessities. He counted the extra fifteen-minute walk as part of his punishment, it did nothing to alleviate his conscience though.

Adrian's phone beeped in his pocket, it was a text from Tom. Adrian had made Tom promise to check in every morning since the menacing visit a couple of months ago from Tom's stepfather, Dominic. He asked Tom to come and live with him on a weekly basis but Tom insisted he needed to stay home and look after

his mother, Adrian's ex Andrea. The text was a timely reminder for Adrian to check in with Gary for progress on their own little investigation into Dominic. He replied to Tom and then sent Gary a message before putting his phone away.

As he reached his front door, Adrian felt in his pocket and realised he didn't have his house keys. Again. Brilliant. He walked around to the side of the house and down the alley that the terraces backed onto. He hoped to God he had left his back door open; the lock was dodgy and sometimes he left it open because he was prone to forgetting his keys. He slung the carrier bag with the bread and milk over the wall, hoping the milk had made it intact; it usually did. He scaled the brick wall that backed onto his property, noticing that it was much harder to do than the last time he'd tried it. Clearly, he was out of shape.

'Breaking and entering?'

He turned his head to look behind him back into the alley and saw Lucy Hannigan with her phone pointed at him, taking a photograph as he straddled the wall.

'I forgot my key.' He swung his leg over the side and she disappeared from view.

The back door to his house was open; he walked in and through to the front door. He could see the outline of Lucy in the glass just as the doorbell rang.

'Fancy seeing you here.' He smiled and opened the door.

'I'm not staying.' She stood steadfast in the doorway, hands in her jacket pockets.

He shrugged. 'Fair enough. How did you get my address?' Had he brought her back here last time? His brain hurt every time he tried to remember their previous encounter.

She pointed at her chest. 'Investigative journalist – remember?'

'Right.'

'I googled you. After all that business with the newsagents near your house, it wasn't hard to find. I just hung around a while until you turned up. To be honest I didn't expect you to be up this early.'

'I see. And what can I do for you?'

'I found out the name of your missing man.'

'You did?'

'The homeless man that usually sleeps in the signal box, the one they call Bricks.'

'How did you find out – no wait, don't tell me ... did you google him?' Adrian smiled at her sarcastically.

'No, although sometimes that does work. I have a few connections on the street, they know homelessness is an issue close to my heart, which means people that wouldn't speak to you might speak to me. I've spent a few months working with these people in order to write this exposé, and they're grateful that someone gives a shit, I guess. I spoke to Claire Johnson, the lady whose number I gave you, and she told me who you were looking for. I asked around and there were a few people who knew your guy, so I got his real name. Thought it might help you

out.'

'So, what's his name then?'

'His name is Theodore Ramsey – or Teddy Ramsey – or, you know – Bricks.'

Adrian nodded, making a mental note of the name. 'Well, thank you for letting me know. Are you sure you don't want a drink or anything?' He was hoping she would say yes, there was something about her. He didn't understand why he couldn't remember her properly; she had rich brown hair that tumbled from her head, haphazard but perfect at the same time. Her eyes were so bright, especially with the thick black liner she wore deliberately smudged around the rims. She seemed impossible to forget. Yet somehow he had.

'No thanks, I have a blog post to write.' She winked as she backed away.

'Sounds important. Am I in it?'

'Not until you do something interesting ...' she called behind her.

He watched her until she disappeared around the corner. She seemed to be quite dismissive of him on purpose, which meant she had the measure of him. There wasn't much that turned Adrian on more than an attractive woman with no interest in him whatsoever. What had he done to piss her off so much the first time they met?

Adrian closed the door with a big smile on his face. He walked back into the house and as he passed the threshold of the lounge

door his skin prickled. Without looking in, he knew someone else was there.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve just come for a chat.’

Adrian pushed open the lounge door to see Dominic sitting on his sofa, smack in the middle, arms either side of him as though he had sat there a million times and this was perfectly normal.

Anger surged through him. ‘You can’t just let yourself in here whenever you want.’

‘Obviously I can.’ He shrugged. The fact that Adrian was a police officer obviously didn’t scare Dominic, and that scared Adrian.

‘What do you want, Dominic?’

‘Just checking in, seeing what you were up to.’

Adrian glanced over to the dining table; the bag of paperwork he and Gary had been working from was tucked safely to the side of it, undisturbed. It was in a reusable carrier bag so he guessed it probably didn’t look all that important.

‘Why?’

‘I just wanted to make sure you were behaving yourself.’

‘Get out before I call for back-up.’

‘Come off it Adrian, you don’t frighten me and you know it.’ He smiled. ‘Actually, this visit is about Tom.’

‘What about Tom?’ Adrian felt sick whenever Dominic said his son’s name.

‘He’s not been very cooperative at home lately, I think maybe he needs a little stability at the moment, so you won’t be seeing

him for a while.’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘According to the court, we need your signature to take Tom out of the country. He’s had a tough year, I think you’ll agree, and he needs a treat.’

‘What are you talking about? Take him where?’

‘Undecided at present, but he’s going to be missing some weekends with you, I’m afraid. I have discussed it with Andrea and we both agree that these visits with you are unsettling for him.’

‘I have a custody agreement.’

‘Of course, this is a courtesy. I am asking nicely.’

‘Well, I’m saying no nicely.’

‘You know, I could make sure you never see either of them again. I can make them disappear.’

There was a pause. Adrian wasn’t sure exactly what he was saying. Was he threatening to kill them? Knowing that he had contacts in human-trafficking added a certain gravitas to Dominic’s threats, it had to be said. Adrian didn’t have anything now, no concrete evidence to pull Dominic in. His instinct was telling him to kill him, but that wouldn’t help anyone.

‘Why are you doing this? Why are you fucking with me?’

‘I don’t like you.’

‘I’ve made it clear that I’m not interested in Andrea anymore, so what threat am I to you exactly?’

‘No threat at all.’ Dominic stood up and dusted his coat as

though he had just fallen in mud. 'But, Adrian?'

'What?'

'If I find out you have been sticking your nose where you shouldn't, you'll be sorry. You'll never see your son again.'

Adrian tried to ignore the sound of his own heart pounding in anger; he mustn't submit to it even though all he wanted to do was drive his fist through Dominic's expensive porcelain smile. Instead he stood to the side, waiting for Dominic to pass. Dominic didn't move for a few moments, just stared at Adrian. A cold stare, a stare that turned Adrian's stomach, like the dead black eyes of a shark. The beginning of a smile adorned his face as he passed Adrian and walked to the front door. Adrian followed behind him, making sure he stepped onto the pavement. He didn't turn to look back at all, just started walking away. Adrian closed the door behind him. He wanted to look out of the window and watch him leave properly, make sure he was gone, but that felt too much like succumbing to fear and he'd promised himself a long time ago that he wouldn't be bullied. Instead he walked straight out of the lounge and into the hallway, punching the wall to release the fury that had built inside him.

How dare he? How dare he come into his house, how dare he mess with his family? Adrian felt powerless against this man, but he needed to find out more before he took any action. If he behaved rashly, he might put his son in danger and that wasn't something he was prepared to do. Patience was not something that Adrian had an abundance of, but he needed to be smart here.

He needed to play the long game to win rather than employing his usual reactionary tactics of hit first, ask questions later. He rubbed his throbbing knuckles and tried to calm down. He couldn't let Dominic push his buttons, couldn't let him win this time.

Chapter 11

No one had mentioned Jason to Gabriel since the first night he had been in. He had had his cell to himself and, although it was unbearably lonely, it felt safer. He hadn't slept well since he'd arrived, even worse since someone had come into his cell at night. He was afraid that it would happen again but it never did.

Solomon Banks had started to knock for Gabriel at mealtimes, and they usually walked to the servery together. He could feel himself adjusting to the routine. Roll call took place several times a day, breaking up the hours spent alone in his cell because he hadn't been granted his labour order yet. He had to stay on his own while the rest of the wing went to their jobs, which mainly consisted of working in the servery or the laundry. There was also no shortage of cleaning gigs around the prison. The most sought-after employment was in the library, it was clean, quiet and quite civilised. It didn't involve you getting wet or dirty. Gabriel wasn't allowed to enrol on any courses yet either, not until he had been sentenced and he hadn't even been given a court date yet.

The uneasiness he had originally felt in the prison had become a part of his day now; he didn't really notice that he was scared anymore, he just got on with things. Being afraid was the new normal. He followed the rules and spoke when he was spoken to. He hadn't made any friends, but he hadn't upset anyone either. Gabriel knew there were cliques in the wing for sure; he just had

to figure out which ones were the most dangerous and stay the hell away from them.

He needed to hold on like this for a while longer. He longed to laugh, to really engage in a conversation, but he felt himself disappearing slowly with every single day. It was no more than he deserved.

The door was opened for lunch and Gabriel stepped outside to find Sol there as usual, this time accompanied by two other men. The fear that Gabriel thought he had adjusted to reared its head with a vengeance. It hit him like a bolt of lightning and his stomach tensed so hard that it started to cramp.

‘Relax, Gabe, this is Kenzie and this is Sparks, they bunk together in the cell next to mine.’ Sol grinned at him.

‘Hi,’ Gabriel managed a smile, noting that both men were shorter than him. There were a lot of short men in prison.

‘This is Gabe.’

Kenzie shook Gabriel’s hand firmly. He must have been of a similar age to him, but he still had a teenage frame, awkward and angular.

Sparks nodded and started to walk towards the servery. ‘Let’s get there early so it’s not stone cold today. I hate cold sausages – all the fat gets clogged up in them and then I get the shits.’

As they headed towards the metal stairwell, Sol held his hand out to the side as though he were a mother trying to stop a child venturing into the road. Gabriel followed the direction of Sol’s eyes and saw a group of men walking towards the stairs as a man

came up them.

‘We should disappear,’ Sol said in a low voice, more serious than Gabriel had seen him before.

‘What’s going on?’ Gabriel asked.

‘Someone’s about to get a kicking,’ Kenzie said excitedly.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Sparks said. ‘I’m starving.’

They walked away from the commotion and Gabriel saw one of the group of men grab the guy on the staircase. Then the three of them laid into him, punching him in the face in quick succession. The guards hadn’t noticed yet. Sol grabbed Gabriel by the arm and pulled him into the cell across the way from him. The ginger man with the beard that Gabriel had seen on his first day was sitting in one of the cell chairs, reading. He looked up and smiled as he saw them. Gabriel had noticed the way he looked at him before, his eyes travelling over his frame at a snail’s pace, resting on his neck, shoulders, torso, hips. He was doing it again and it made him uneasy.

‘What the hell do you reprobates want?’ the ginger man said, putting down his magazine and shifting his gaze to Sol briefly.

‘It’s kicking off out there,’ Sol said, ‘we’re just hiding out.’

They could hear shouting and people shuffling about out on the wing.

‘I’d better get some fucking dinner,’ Sparks exclaimed in a huff.

‘Who’s your new friend?’

‘This is Gabe. Gabe, this is Asher.’

‘Gabe.’ He said the word with a twinkle in his eye. He held his hand out and Gabriel nodded acknowledgment but didn’t take the hand.

Asher smiled. ‘Suit yourself.’

‘Hi,’ Gabriel said, reluctantly.

‘Who is it?’ Asher asked Sol, leaning over his shoulder to look through the door of the cell.

‘Andy Welsh. They got him on the staircase. It doesn’t look good,’ Sol said.

‘Maybe they tried his cooking,’ Sparks offered.

‘Isn’t Welsh in with you?’ Asher said to Sol. ‘You burn through cellmates faster than anyone else in here.’

‘I was going to ask for a cell transfer anyway, Welsh is a twat,’ Sol said.

Sparks stuck his head around the door quickly, presumably to see what was going on outside the cell.

‘Lockdown!’ Gabriel heard Barratt call out.

‘Do we go back to our cells?’

‘Nah, stay here. They just want the wing cleared to sort the mess out,’ Asher said.

‘Do you think he’s dead?’ Sparks asked.

‘You’re such a fucking gossip,’ Sol said to Sparks.

‘Shall I look?’ Kenzie asked.

‘Just relax. He’s obviously not or it would be going mental out there,’ Sol said, as ever the voice of reason.

‘Sausage and mash is literally the highlight of my bloody

week,' Sparks grumbled.

'Will you stop going on about food, man!' Kenzie barked, wrapping his arms around his stomach. 'At least with Welsh gone we might get something edible next dinner time.'

Gabriel wasn't a big eater, he had already lost weight since being inside, but the truth was, the meals were only just filling enough to get you through to the next one and so any kind of delay felt like unnecessary cruelty and a stark reminder of their circumstances. You could almost pretend once you had settled into the routine that everything was OK and that this wouldn't be forever. But, in reality, you were usually just counting meals – or whatever else your crutch in prison was. He had seen some people obviously on drugs on the inside, but he had no idea how they were being distributed. He didn't want to know either. His brief had warned him to just keep his head down until the hearing came.

'OK boys, go get your food.' A dishevelled Barratt knocked on the door.

Gabriel noticed that Barratt always looked a mess, and he didn't smell great either. There was just something worn about him, something that wasn't quite up to standard. Maybe he'd recently separated, maybe he was living alone for the first time in years – it was as though it was all new to him. His shoes were scuffed, all his seams frayed and there were lots of stains on his uniform, the kind that probably would wash out if you just tried. It was almost as if Barratt had given up on himself. Maybe this

kind of apathy came with the job.

They all walked out on the wing, Asher following a few feet behind them. One of the inmates Gabriel didn't know was mopping blood from the foot of the staircase. He felt sick again but no one else was even paying attention, stepping over the blood as though it were a spilled drink. They all headed to the servery and continued the conversations about the food on offer. Gabriel couldn't even think about food, his appetite had all but disappeared.

'Have you had a shower yet?' Sparks asked.

'Not really, not properly.'

'I thought as much, you're a bit whiffy, mate.'

'It's very rare for bad shit to happen in the showers. It's not like the movies, you know,' Sol chipped in, as though sensing Gabriel's worry.

'The screws are opposite anyway. It's pretty heavily monitored; it was a condition of the last inspection,' Sparks added.

'I'll get round to it,' Gabriel said, trying not to be as evasive as he felt.

'Listen Gabe, you need to relax a little, find your groove,' Sol said. 'Everyone in here is mostly trying to keep their head down, do their time and then get out. Don't let stuff scare you. If you're thinking about your cellmate Jason, he was just an idiot, that's all. If you're that worried you should request to stay with me.' It seemed Sol had already written off his own cellmate, who was

probably being carried off to the infirmary as they spoke.

Gabriel sighed. 'What happened to Jason anyway? Will someone tell me now?'

'He's in the infirmary and then he'll be moved to D-wing. If he recovers,' Sol said. He always seemed to know what was going on around the prison. People spoke to him.

'You probably shouldn't mention him again. If the screws catch you, they will be pissed off,' Sparks said.

'Why?' Gabriel asked.

'Because he's just a reminder of how little control they have in here. If we all decided to kick off at the same time, they would be fucked,' Sparks whispered.

'Look, Gabe, the fact is, I'm surprised you've been alone this long and I don't particularly want you to be in the pad-mate lottery,' Sol said. 'They won't let you stay alone forever and you never know who you're gonna get. If people know you're my cellie they will leave you alone.'

'Yeah, just like Welsh back there.' Sparks winked at Kenzie and they both laughed.

'But I'm on remand and you've already been sentenced.' Gabriel ignored them and continued talking to Sol.

'If you request it, they'll consider it. Unless they think we're a couple or something,' Sol said.

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