

THE BIGGEST THREATS  
ARE THE ONES  
CLOSEST TO HOME...

# THE FAMILY MAN

T.J. LEBBON

**T.J. Lebbon**

**The Family Man: An edge-of-your-seat read that you won't be able to put down**

**Аннотация**

You take ONE risk. Now, those you love must pay ... Dom Turner is a dependable husband, a loving father. A man you can rely on. But it only takes one day to destroy a seemingly perfect life. Emma thought she could trust her husband, Dom. She thought he would always look after her and their daughter Daisy ... Then one reckless act ends in two innocent deaths – and Dom's family becomes the target of a terrifying enemy. There's nowhere to hide. They're on the run for their lives. And if Dom makes one more wrong move, he won't have a family left to protect.

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## Praise for *The Hunt*

‘A pacy thriller that had me on the edge of my seat!’

*Sun*

‘A great thriller ... breathless all the way.’

*Lee Child*

‘A breakout new voice in thrillers.’

*Sarah Pinborough*

‘Cleverly executed and full of suspense.’

*My Weekly*

‘The plot is fast moving and keeps you on the edge of your seat all the way through.’

*Crime Book Club*

‘The pace of plotting and the well-realised location of the rugged and hostile terrain of Snowdonia add to the feel of a tension fuelled thriller.’

*Crime Fiction Lover*

‘Guaranteed to get your heart pounding.’

*Crooks on Books*

# Dedication

For Pic

*'The battle line between good and evil runs through the heart of every man.'*

– Alexander Solzhenitsyn

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## Author's Note

**Author's Note:** Some of the towns and locations in this novel exist in real life. In fact, I live very close to Usk and Abergavenny and they're both very beautiful places. I have also visited Brusvily in France many times, and it is equally lovely. But I've taken the monstrous liberty of changing things about these places to suit the novel – layout, landscape, the names of shops and pubs. It's a terrible indulgence, and I beg your forgiveness.

## *Chapter One*

### *The Space Between Breaths*

When it regained consciousness, he had already glued its mouth shut.

This excited him. It was like locking the life inside, not letting it bleed out. Usually there was some sort of leakage as something died beneath his hands – blood, breath, tears. This already felt different. He decided that he would use the glue again.

He turned away as it started to twist and moan. The bindings were tight, and he knew that there was no chance of it working its way free. Not in the short time it had left. But for a moment he wanted to observe unseen, not meet its gaze. He liked the power this gave him.

Circling around behind the chair, he paused to watch. Perhaps it could smell him. It could certainly hear him, because his breathing was deep and heavy, calm. But now that it could no longer see him, the panic was deeper, the desperation more divine.

He watched for a while, coughing once, uttering a long, low whistle, excited at how these sounds affected its behaviour – a pause, and then more frantic efforts to break free.

He glanced around the room. The house was old and abandoned, everything neat and ordered but layered with years

of dust, perhaps the home of a dead person with no relatives. It was out of time, and he was confident that he would not be interrupted. The traditional life represented here by a bulky TV, a table for dinner, and family photographs, was not *his* life.

Far from it.

A loud snort drew his attention back to his victim. Blood and mucus shot from its broken nose, and then it breathed more easily.

He closed slowly from behind, and then pounced.

Moving with confidence, he pulled its head back against the high-backed chair, pressed the tube's nozzle into one nostril, and squirted the superglue inside.

Then he dropped the tube and squeezed its nose shut.

As it squirmed and tensed, attempting to writhe from side to side against the ropes, its strength surprised him. He had to pull back hard, tipping the chair onto its two rear legs. But it didn't take long.

After a minute he let the chair drop back onto all fours. The impact on the hardwood floor had the sound of finality. Retrieving the tube of glue, he moved around to face it for the last time.

Its right nostril was closed, deformed. Its eyes were wide and desperate, issuing pleas that it knew would not be answered.

He could see that realisation in its eyes – there was no hope, and the only future remaining was the space between this breath and its last. That pleased him. Its panic was his fuel.

Pressing its head back against the chair, he heard the sudden inhalation that would feed those final few seconds. He squirted glue into its open nostril. Squeezed the nose shut. Looked into its eyes.

‘Shhh,’ he said.

But even then, he did not smile.

## *Chapter Two*

### *One Thing*

It was the downhills that scared Dom the most.

He'd once read that cycling defines the man, and as he mounted the brow of the hill and followed Andy down into the first curve of the big descent, he couldn't help but agree.

Andy was hunched low, hands on drop bars, head down, arse up, and he was already moving noticeably ahead.

Dom's hands were feathering the brakes. They'd ridden this descent together several times before, and it was always at this point that the fear bit in.

The garish pink house flitted by on the left, big dog barking from the raised deck and old man sitting in his garden rocker as usual, a bemused expression on his face.

On the right was a low hedge guarding an incredible view across the Monmouthshire countryside, shimmering and hazed in the growing heat of yet another scorching day. And then the road curved around to the left and grew steeper, and there was no going back.

The breeze blasting past his ears carried a distorted 'Yeaaahaaaa!' from Andy, and Dom grinned and hunkered down over his handlebars. As the road straightened into the long, steep descent, Andy was speeding away from him.

Dom always thought about what could go wrong. He knew the route pretty well, and so could swerve around the two portions that were rough and holed. But he'd once seen a squirrel dart across the road just feet from Andy's spinning wheels. If that happened to him, he'd either strike it and spill, or panic and grasp the brakes, which would probably result in a skid and crash.

There was one area of road halfway down that had slumped, kerb bowing down the hillside and road surface cracked and dipped where it was starting to collapse. Trees shaded the road for the last mile of descent, and in those shadows it was harder to see the surface. He might get a bee trapped in his helmet or, worse, behind one lens of his glasses. A puncture at over forty miles per hour could be catastrophic.

At the bottom of the descent was another bend, not too severe, but at those speeds he'd have to steer on trust: trust that there was no car coming the other way in the middle of the road; no cows crossing; no crows feeding on the slick remains of a crushed badger, or—

But as he switched his hands to the drop bars and the wind rushed past his ears, Dom realised that today felt different. Maybe it was the three straight weeks of record-breaking heat and cloudless skies. It could have been the thrill of being out so early, enjoying almost traffic-free roads for the first hour of their ride.

Or perhaps it was because he and his wife, Emma, had made love on their patio the night before. He'd been worried about

being seen, even though the garden of their modest detached home was hardly overlooked. She'd soon seen away his fears.

As his speed increased and he reminded himself to be loose and relaxed, he yelled in delight.

Andy still beat him to the bottom, disappearing around the bend twenty seconds before Dom.

Dom moved into the centre of the road and raised himself slightly, trying to see through the trees and shadows and make out whether anything was coming in the opposite direction. He swept around the corner and drifted back towards the left, and as his momentum decreased he switched down a few awkward gears and started pedalling. He'd have to get his gearing sorted before the descents. One more thing he should work on.

Andy was waiting for him half a mile further on. He straddled his bike in the village hall car park, gulping down a drink and looking cool in his expensive shades. Dom came to a stop beside his friend, breathing hard, not from exertion but from the thrill of the descent.

'Fifty-one!' Andy said.

Dom checked his bike computer. 'Forty-eight. Fastest I've done down there. Felt good today.'

'Do one thing every day that scares you.' Andy was fond of the Eleanor Roosevelt quotation, and it always made Dom smile. On these long rides with Andy, he'd usually manage two or three things, at least.

'Christ, it's scorching already,' Dom said. Now that he'd

stopped the sweat ran down his face and soaked his jersey, even speckling the hairs on his legs. Andy looked sweaty too, but it seemed to suit him more. His T-shirt was tight and clingy, but whereas Dom's jersey showed his pudgy waistline and lanky arms, Andy's clung to his flat stomach and broad shoulders.

'You'll beat me down one day,' Andy said.

'Doubt that.'

'Should do. You have a distinct weight advantage.'

'Yeah, yeah, thanks.'

Andy grinned. 'So, cake and coffee with the Moody Cow?'

'Damn right.'

Moody Cow was not the name of their favourite pit stop on this particular route, nor the woman who ran the cafe. That was the Blue Door and Sue respectively. But she'd given them enough stern looks to invite the name which had become permanent.

Andy reckoned she fancied him and was playing hard to get. Dom thought it quite likely. Over the two years he'd known Andy, Emma had called him grizzled, rough, and lived-in, and his string of casual girlfriends attested to his effect on the opposite sex.

'Race you!' Andy said. He caged his drink bottle, clipped in and moved off without looking back.

Dom followed. He was pretty good at sprints on the flat, and had been working hard on his turbo trainer over the previous winter to improve his power. Nevertheless, it took the whole two miles to the village of Upper Mill for him to catch Andy, and even then he had the weird feeling his friend let him win.

‘Pipped me,’ Andy said outside the Moody Cow. ‘Coffee and cake on me.’ He leaned his bike against the fence and opened the big blue door.

Dom watched him go, leaning on his handlebars. He was exhausted, breath heavy and burning in his chest, legs shaking. Sweat ran behind his biking glasses and misted them, and he had to take them off. Andy had hardly seemed out of breath.

‘Bloody hell, fat bastard,’ he muttered, taking deep breaths and feeling his galloping heartbeat beginning to settle. In truth, he wasn’t fat at all. Compared to most men in their early forties he was way above average when it came to fitness, even though he carried a few pounds extra. But Andy wasn’t most men, and Dom really wished he could stop comparing himself to his friend. They were good mates, but their lifestyles were chalk and cheese, and he wouldn’t change a thing.

Leaving the bikes against the timber fencing that surrounded the cafe’s front garden, he chose a table in the shade.

There were a couple of elderly couples having their morning coffee, and at the garden’s far end a group of businessmen nattered over fluttering sheets and a laptop.

There was also a couple of women, maybe in their early thirties, dressed in tight shorts and vest tops. They’d obviously been for a run, water bottles discarded on the table in favour of tall fruit smoothies. One of them caught his eye. He smiled; she glanced back to her friend.

Dom unzipped his jersey halfway, self-consciously turning his

back on the women. As he sat down and kicked off his bike shoes, one of them laughed softly. It was nothing to do with him. It can't have been.

He took the phone from his jersey's back pocket and slipped it from its pouch. There were no missed calls or texts, but he took a selfie with the cafe behind him and sent it to Emma. *Refuelling stop*, he typed with the picture.

Andy appeared and scraped a seat across into the sunlight before slumping in it. 'The coffee stop of kings,' he said. 'Our lovely hostess will bring our morning repast forthwith.'

'Nice.'

'Ahh, this is the life.' Andy stretched like a cat. 'Nice spot, this.'

'Sue should start giving us regulars' discount.'

'Right, I'll let you ask her.'

Dom smiled.

'So what's next week got in store for you?' Andy asked.

'New kitchen fit-out up in Monmouth.'

Today, Dom had given himself a rare day off from work. He ran his own small electrical firm, just himself and an apprentice who'd been with him for three years. Davey was a good worker and a pleasant lad, and Dom was pretty sure he'd soon be making a break to set up on his own. He didn't mind that so much. It was bound to happen, and he couldn't expect the lad to stay working for him forever.

Andy chuckled. 'Oh, Mr Electrician, have you come to rewire

my plugs?’

‘Yeah, like that’s ever happened.’

‘Sure it has.’

‘Not all manual labourers have lives resembling the plots of pornos, you know.’

‘No?’

‘That’s just you.’

‘Sure, the sordid life of a freelance technical writer.’

‘So how is the gorgeous Claudette?’ Dom asked.

Andy had been on–off dating a French doctor spending a year on a work exchange at the hospital in Abergavenny. Early-thirties and beautiful, Dom had only met her once.

Andy leaned over. ‘Porn star,’ he whispered, grinning.

Dom rolled his eyes, and when he looked at his friend again, Andy was staring across the road.

‘Take a look at that,’ he said.

Dom followed his gaze. He was expecting to see the two women jogging away, or another attractive woman perhaps walking her dog. So at first he couldn’t quite make out what Andy had been staring at.

‘What?’

‘Security guy.’

A security van was pulled up across the square, and a man was carrying a heavy black case into the local post office.

Dom had never been in there, but it was obviously a typical village post office, doubling as a newsagent and grocer. It

had a selection of wooden garden furniture for sale out front, windows half-filled with flyers for local jumble sales and amateur dramatic presentations, and a homemade display wall of bird tables and feeders.

He'd seen people going in and out, and often they'd stop and chat on the wide pavement in front of the shop. This village was far smaller than Usk where he lived, and everyone seemed to know everyone else. The Blue Door cafe probably only thrived because of the main road that ran through the place. That, and the entertaining sourness of its owner.

'So?' Dom asked.

'Doesn't have his helmet on.'

'It's hot.'

'And he's left the van's driver's door open.'

'It's *really* hot. So, what, you're casing the joint?'

Sue arrived then, placing a tray on their table and giving them their drinks and cake. She knew whose was whose.

'Busy day?' Dom asked.

'Rushed off my feet.' She left them and cleared a couple of tables before going back inside.

'Wow. Positively chatty today,' Dom said, but Andy was still staring across the street and didn't respond. 'What now?'

Andy stuffed some flapjack into his mouth and took a swig of coffee. Then he nodded across the small square again. 'Just asking to be ripped off.'

The security man was standing outside the post office talking

to a large, middle-aged woman. Dom had seen her before, and he guessed she was the postmistress. They were standing in front of the display window, shielding their eyes against the sun as they chatted. The woman threw her head back and laughed. The man waved his free hand as if to illustrate a point more clearly. He still carried the case.

‘How much do you reckon’s in there?’ Andy asked.

‘No idea.’

‘Just standing there.’

Dom started on his chocolate shortbread, balancing the guilt against the promise of a thirty-mile ride back home.

Andy ate silently, then drank more coffee.

It wasn’t like him to be so quiet, Dom thought. Usually he’d be joshing, making quips about some of the other patrons, talking about the ride they’d had and the route to take back home.

‘Suppose it’s pretty safe around here,’ Dom said, more to break the silence than anything else.

Andy shrugged.

‘Just take one daring person, though.’ He licked his finger and picked up crumbs from his plate, looked into his empty cup, obviously contemplating another coffee.

‘Or two,’ Dom said. He chuckled. “‘And no one ever suspected the two innocent cyclists”, the papers’ll say.’

Andy glanced up at him, and the moment paused.

Dom still heard chatter from the women and businessmen, and even the distant mumble of voices from across by the post

office. But the air between him and his friend seemed to stop for a moment, movement ceased, and Andy's eyes grew painted and still.

Then he sat back in his chair and stretched, interlocking his fingers and cracking his knuckles above his head.

'Gonna be a hot ride,' he said. 'Get back to Usk two-ish. How about I carry on home and change, then get back down for a couple of early evening ones at the Ship?'

'Friday cider weather,' Dom said.

'Damn right.'

They stood and headed back to their bikes.

On the way through the small garden area they passed the two joggers. 'Morning, ladies,' Andy said. He got a smile from one of them, and a lingering stare from the other.

Dom sighed. It was a hilly ride home. He'd be following in Andy's wake.

## Chapter Three

### Dangerous

Later that evening the Ship was full, customers spilling across the gardens and down onto the riverbank. Dom was enjoying the familiar post-exercise glow, a tiredness that felt earned, knowing that his aching muscles the next day would soon fade away. Three pints in, his potential aching head was another matter.

‘Another?’ Andy asked.

‘You’re driving home. You’re already over the limit.’

‘I’ll drink lemonade. Doesn’t mean you can’t have another pint of dirty.’ The Ship served a local scrumpy that they’d nicknamed dirty, an acquired taste but seemingly brewed especially for scorching summer evenings like this. After a bike ride. With canoes on the river and half the village sprawled around the pub.

Dom held out his glass. ‘Hit me, baby, one more time.’

Andy headed for the pub, leaving Dom sitting on the grassy riverbank staring at the water moving lazily by. He knew plenty of people here to chat to, but he was enjoying this moment of peace and calm reflection.

He’d always considered himself blessed. He and Emma made a good team. Their daughter, Daisy, was almost eleven years old, bright and fun, growing towards her teens with grace and intelligence. Some of their other friends were having trouble with

their teenaged kids, ranging from strops and long bouts of sulky we-know-better moods, to full on boozing, and in one case being hooked up with a guy ten years their senior. At twenty that wasn't so bad. At fifteen it was an issue.

But Dom did not fear Daisy growing up. She already seemed to have her head screwed on right, and had a great sense of humour that he put down to her confidence amongst adults. Sometimes he looked at her and loved her so much it ached.

He blinked and smiled softly. Booze getting to his head. He'd changed a lot upon becoming a father. Softened up, so Emma said, and when he found himself sobbing watching certain programmes on TV, he couldn't argue. But as well as softening up, becoming a father had rounded him out. Occasionally Andy's shenanigans sounded attractive – the women, the bachelor pad, the impulsive trips abroad to climb some mountain, or kayak along a bloody river somewhere – but he couldn't imagine being without his family.

He and Emma had their troubled moments, but what married couple didn't? They were comfortable, at least to the extent that they didn't really worry about the day-to-day things. More money would always be nice. Working less would be good, too, both for him and Emma. He didn't want to be grafting like this into his late fifties and sixties, that was for sure. But overall they were blessed.

So he wondered just how that seed planted by Andy had taken root.

Every time he blinked, he saw the postmistress standing outside her shop, leaning back and laughing at the sky.

‘Here you go, pisshead.’ Andy handed him a pint and sat next to him. He had a pint of lemonade and a couple of bags of nuts. ‘They never should have banned swimming in the river.’

‘It was dangerous. Young Sammy Parks almost drowned.’

‘Yeah, and spoiled my view.’

‘Not all women in bikinis are parading for your delectation.’

Andy stared at him hard. ‘Of course they are.’

They laughed. Drank. Two friends with an easy, undemanding friendship. Andy got on well with Daisy and Emma. He flirted with Dom’s wife, but he’d flirt with an oak tree if it wore a skirt. Or probably more so if it didn’t. Harmless fun, friendly banter.

Andy was the impulsive one. The dangerous one, Emma had said more than once, which Dom didn’t try to take as her saying *he* should be more impulsive or dangerous.

‘That post office,’ Dom said.

‘Yeah.’ Andy turned suddenly serious, speaking quieter and looking around. Kids played and laughed, music rode the steamy evening air from somewhere. No one was paying them any attention. ‘We should do it.’

‘Huh?’

‘As you said, no one would suspect us.’ Andy swigged his lemonade. He’d had three pints of cider beforehand, but Dom had rarely seen him drunk. Alcohol didn’t seem to affect his friend’s opinions or judgement. It barely seemed to touch him

at all.

‘Yeah,’ he agreed. ‘Me, an electrician. Primary school governor. I’ve even got a Labrador. Mr Average, Mr Boring.’

‘You’re not boring.’

Dom looked at Andy. ‘I’m not the one who jets off to climb glaciers.’ One of Andy’s recent trips had taken him to Iceland. He’d been gone for two weeks.

Andy shrugged. He had a strange expression, similar to what Dom had seen at the Blue Door earlier that day. A blankness to his eyes, like he was suddenly someone else.

‘And you,’ Dom said. ‘Technical writer. Lots of cash. Bit of a cock, true, but never been in trouble.’

‘Bury the cash for a while,’ Andy said. ‘Carry on normally.’

‘Just one job,’ Dom said, chuckling at the cliché, then falling quiet again. It was a weird subject to be talking about in such a place of sunlight and laughter.

‘So let’s plan!’ Andy said. ‘It’ll be a laugh.’

It took on the air of a joke, and with that lightness came a rush of ideas from them both. It was a throwaway conversation, one they’d have both forgotten by the time they got home, just one of many conversations that filled the times they spent drinking together. Emma would often ask, ‘So what did you talk about all evening?’ Dom’s response was invariably, ‘Can’t really remember.’ Four hours with barely a pause for breath, and he often recalled none of it.

This was like that. Except their conversation had an air of

danger about it, and a sense that they were discussing forbidden things, secrets that could never be shared. It was a private, almost intimate thing between them, and it made Dom feel good.

‘We’d have to steal a car,’ he said.

‘Or just blank the number plates with mud. Use yours. Everyone’s got a Focus.’

‘Right, thanks.’

‘Just that stealing a car changes it from one job to two.’

‘Fair point. So ... weapons?’

‘Don’t need them,’ Andy said.

‘And we couldn’t get them even if we did,’ Dom said.

Andy didn’t really answer. ‘These postmasters don’t give a shit about the money in their safe; it’s not theirs, it’s insured, and they won’t lose a thing if it’s nicked.’

‘You’re sure about that?’ Dom asked.

‘Just guessing.’ Andy drained his lemonade. ‘It’s afterwards that matters. The job takes ten minutes, but it’s the days and weeks afterwards when we could give ourselves away.’

‘We’d still have to ride out that way!’ Dom said. It was almost exciting. ‘Sit outside the Blue Door as usual.’

‘Everything as normal,’ Andy agreed.

‘Then we’d be seen on crime scene photos by the investigators, like perps returning to the scene of their crime.’

‘What, Dom, you after infamy?’

‘I’m after nothing,’ Dom said. It sounded awkward, too serious. ‘Just buckets full of cold, hard cash.’

‘Probably won’t get buckets from a little provincial place like that.’

‘How much do you reckon?’

‘Dunno.’ Andy shrugged. ‘Hit it at the right time, maybe forty grand?’

‘Nice little nest egg.’

‘Not bad for ten minutes’ work,’ Andy agreed. He looked around and smiled. ‘Wonder what everyone would think if they knew what we were talking about.’

Dom glanced around at the full pub garden and bustling riverbank. Men with sun-reddened torsos smiled wider than usual, alcohol soothing their worries. Women sported summer hats and sleeveless dresses. Kids darted here and there, a few people in canoes fought against the river’s flow, and a couple of hundred metres along the bank, youths were jumping ten feet into the water from an old wooden mooring. A boy and girl crouched near the bank with phones, trying to get the best shots.

‘No one would believe us,’ Dom said. Andy grasped his arm and leaned in close.

‘That’s why we really should do it.’

‘Don’t be soft.’

‘Why not? It’s not hurting anyone. Your worst criminal record is a speeding fine. I don’t even have that. We’re the last people the law would turn to. In, out, done. And like you say, a nest egg for the future.’

Dom swigged some more cider. It was going to his head now,

swilling confusion behind his eyes, freeing inhibitions. Emma always said he was a man made free after a couple of pints, as if alcohol could snip off the constraints he'd imposed upon himself to get by in society and life.

'Sure,' he said. 'After another pint.'

'Pisshead.'

'Sure.'

Dom swayed a little as he walked across the pub garden, nodding at the people he knew, pausing to chat a couple of times.

Inside he dumped the empties on a table and went for a leak. Leaning his head against the wall, watching his piss swill down the urinal, he tried to make light of the post office idea.

But he couldn't. Though it was something he knew he could never really do, just thinking about it was exciting, and talking it through with Andy gave it that edge. That sheen of reality. Andy had a way of making the dangerous seem possible.

Dom knew he should stop drinking, but it didn't feel like a normal day. Still buzzing from the long ride, the blazing sunlight and unusual heat, and the weird sense of danger pervading their conversation, he bought one more pint.

On the way back to Andy on the riverbank he was thinking about disguises.

'One last glass?' Mandy asked.

She and Emma had already polished off one bottle of Prosecco between them, and were halfway through the second. But it was that sort of day. Gorgeous weather, a nice couple of

hours that afternoon with Dom in the garden after his bike ride, Daisy at a camping sleepover with friends.

Mandy had turned up at their house unannounced, complaining that her boyfriend, Paul, had fucked off on a football weekend without her again, and it had turned into one of those long, impromptu boozy evenings that were always the best kind.

‘Be rude to leave it in the bottle,’ Emma said.

‘Rude,’ Mandy agreed, giggling. She couldn’t hold her drink very well, but she drank the most out of all Emma’s friends. It wasn’t *quite* a problem, Emma usually thought. Not yet.

Conversation had moved rapidly on from character assassinating Mandy’s absent boyfriend. They’d gossiped about others in the village, the housing estate being built on the outskirts, the new headmistress in Daisy’s primary school, and a dozen other things she could hardly remember. It had been a fun couple of hours. But now there was a slight chill on the evening air, and as Mandy poured, Emma stood to fetch blankets for them.

‘You’re lucky,’ Mandy said.

‘How so?’ Emma leaned against the back door jamb.

‘Dominic. He’s so dependable.’

‘Yeah, he is.’ Emma nodded and smiled, glancing at the ground.

‘Oh, really,’ Mandy said, shaking her head and almost tumbling herself from the patio chair. ‘Come on, Em, there’s no way you can deny it.’

‘I don’t deny his dependability. Never have.’

‘But ...’ Mandy said. ‘Sheesh.’ She shook her head and took a big swig of Prosecco.

They’d had this conversation a thousand times before, and Emma was angry at Mandy for bringing it up again. She’d done it on purpose, barely mentioning Dom before launching into judgemental mode.

‘We’re fine,’ Emma said.

‘Yeah, but he’s “boring”.’ She made speech marks with her fingers.

‘I’ve never said that.’

‘You’ve never had to.’ Mandy tapped her glass. She wore rings on every finger apart from her wedding ring finger. ‘Got a good business, worships you and Daisy, not bad looking. Good in bed.’

Emma waved her hand from side to side, trying to lighten up the conversation. She really should tell Mandy to stop, go home, sober up. Her boyfriend would be home in a couple of days and she could take it out on him.

‘You should be happy. You’re lucky.’

‘I *am* happy,’ Emma said. She ignored the inner niggles casting doubts on that thought. She always did.

‘Dunno what’s good for you,’ Mandy muttered.

‘I’m going to get those blankets.’ Emma entered the house and stood in the kitchen for a while, pouring a glass of water from the fridge and relishing its cool tickle down her throat.

She moved past feeling angry at Mandy. They’d been friends

for a long time, but Mandy was sometimes a mess, and she was never averse to projecting her own unhappiness onto her friends. Some of it was self-pity, some jealousy. She was definitely jealous of Emma.

She glanced at the clock. Dom would be home soon. She smiled, because there was nothing wrong with dependable. Perhaps compared to what she'd known in her younger years, he *was* boring. But boring was better than imprisoned, boring was better than dead. She had friends from her twenties who were both.

'Bloody freezing out here!' she heard Mandy shout from outside.

Emma went through to the living room and swept up a couple of throws from the sofa.

'So when do you and Paul go to Menorca?' she asked when she returned outside, determined to take control of the conversation.

Mandy smiled, then frowned, then started crying. Yeah. It really was time for her to go home.

'I remember when a first class stamp used to be eighteen pence,' Andy said. 'What is it now? Fifty? Sixty? I've lost touch. It goes up so often I'm confused. That's not inflation, that's Royal Mail screwing us for as much cash as they can because they're a monopoly.'

'There're other delivery firms,' Dom said.

'Like who?' Andy took another chip from the polystyrene tray between them. It was such a nice evening that they'd decided to

sit in the small park opposite the chip shop to eat.

‘Little old grannies,’ Dom said. ‘It’d hurt them. Stealing pension money that an old granny needs to buy her food.’

‘Wrong,’ Andy said, his voice sing-song. He had a way of doing that, sometimes. Announcing Dom’s mistake with a flourish, almost revelling in his wrongness. ‘I told you, they’re insured.’

Dom sighed and held his head, elbows rested on the wooden park table. He didn’t feel drunk any more. He felt tired, a little hungover, and the heat had gone from pleasant to claustrophobic. With darkness fallen, the humidity persisted like a ghost of the day just gone. *I really need to go home*, Dom thought. *Emma. Bed. Normality.*

Instead, they were talking about robbery.

Dom still couldn’t quite put his finger on when things had changed. Even at the Ship, their discussion had been conducted with the air of an adventure, an almost childlike game of *what-if?* As fresh pints of dirty stole his balance and slurred his voice, Dom had found himself giggling as they’d discussed what sort of disguises they could use, what to call each other, and how it would actually work out.

*I want to be Mr Black.*

*Does Emma wear stockings or tights? Can you steal some?*

*That was Tim Roth. Wasn’t it?*

*Or Muppet T-shirts, with holes for eyes.*

*Maybe it was Harvey Keitel.*

‘No one will lose out, apart from the Royal Mail,’ Andy said. He was a shadowy silhouette, silvered by moonlight, a stranger who Dom hardly knew. ‘And do you know what effect a forty grand loss will have on them?’

‘What?’ Dom asked.

‘None at all.’

‘I’m going home,’ Dom said.

‘Sleep on it.’

‘No.’ Dom snorted, standing from the small park bench. ‘No. I’m not sleeping on it. You might think I’m pissed, but I’m really not any more. To be honest, it worries me that I can’t tell whether you’re joking or not.’

Still seated, Andy smiled up at him and ate some more chips. He looked smug, confident, strong. Superior. Dom hated the way his friend sometimes made him feel.

‘You’re just taking the piss,’ Dom said. ‘I’ll walk home.’

‘Don’t always be a loser,’ Andy muttered.

‘What?’ Dom wasn’t quite sure what he’d just heard.

‘Huh?’ Andy asked, eyebrows raised. ‘Nothing. Thanks for a good night, mate. See you soon.’

‘Yeah,’ Dom said. ‘Soon.’ He walked through the children’s park to the gate, doing his best not to sway or swerve, head pounding with the promise of tomorrow’s hangover. With every step he felt Andy’s gaze upon him.

*No one will lose out ... no one will ever suspect us.*

At the gate he glanced back, but Andy had already left.

At first Emma thought that Dom had gone to sleep.

She knew that he'd drunk more than usual, and he'd come through the back gate and thrown his arms around her, as if she was his one safe place. He'd kissed her and smelled her hair, and they'd hugged with an unusual strength. Usually it was an affectionate kiss before work or a fly-by hugging while they were busy around the house. But this was an embrace with need.

She'd wondered what had happened that evening. What he and Andy had been talking about. But when she'd asked his response had been, *This and that. Can't really remember.*

He was breathing heavily, snoring very softly, lying on his back. They were both naked on top of the bed covers. If Daisy had been here they'd have covered up. But it was still swelteringly hot inside, even though it was almost midnight. Their house was a detached dormer bungalow, so essentially they slept in the roof. They'd talked for some time about buying an air conditioning unit for the upstairs, but it had remained just talk. The ceiling fan did little to alleviate the humid discomfort, but at that moment she didn't mind being hot.

She was often the one to initiate sex. Especially after they'd had a drink, when Dom inevitably lasted longer, and inhibitions melted away. She lay on her side and stared at the shadow of him, listening to him breathing. Mandy was wrong. She didn't think Dom was boring, she thought he was safe. Although sometimes, just sometimes, that might mean the same thing.

She reached across and rested her hand on his thigh. He was

slick with sweat. He always perspired more after a few pints.

Emma closed her eyes. Her breathing came deeper. She was far from drunk, but she was tired and contented. The *swish swish* of the ceiling fan was soporific, and at last she was starting to feel a cooling chill where the shifting air passed across her own damp skin.

She dwelled in that nebulous dreamland between consciousness and sleep. Dom passed by her on a bike, chasing Andy but never catching up. They were on a desert road. The distant hills were snowcapped, the plain harsh and flaming here and there from the relentless sun. Even though he was way in the lead, Andy kept passing by where she sat at the roadside, grinning at her each time. *He's in the bath*, she said every time he whipped past, dust roiling in his wake. But she spoke in his words, because it had been him who'd actually muttered them. Far across the plain a band played, their music silent but its anger painting the landscape around them red. From this distance she couldn't see for sure whether it was Genghis Cant, the band she'd hung out with when she was in her early twenties, but she was quite certain it was. There was no other reason she'd feel the way she did.

Andy's bike whipped past again and again, faster and faster, and the lead singer of Genghis Cant, Max Mort, suddenly screamed his most infamous song into her face, exhorting her to snort the heroin of life from the thighs of the dead.

Emma experienced a moment of dislocation as she snapped awake, but it quickly faded. Dom had rolled across and taken

her in his arms. The safe night enveloped her and she sighed in comfort, and relief, and an overwhelming desire for the man who had been her husband for so long.

They kissed passionately, saying nothing. Their skin was slick where their bodies pressed together. She reached between them and grabbed him, slowly stroking. His right hand explored her body, moving across her stomach and down between her thighs. He breathed heavily into her mouth and then kissed her cheek. He smelled of alcohol and sweat, but it was a clean, honest smell.

He gently bit her neck just beneath her left ear. Emma gasped, and a shiver went through her. He might have been drunk, but he knew what she liked.

‘Let’s go outside,’ Dom said. ‘Do it in the garden again.’

‘Really?’ She wished he hadn’t spoken. It broke the moment. And he’d paused, his passion held back even though their bodies were entwined, hands no longer working at each other, only holding.

‘Do one thing every day that scares you,’ he said, propping up so he could stare down at her in the weak moonlight.

‘You sound like Andy,’ she said, chuckling.

Dom stiffened, then pushed himself off, flopping down on his back. The loss of contact was a shock, and Emma felt suddenly cold.

‘Why would you mention him?’ Dom asked.

‘I was only ... I didn’t mean anything.’

‘But why bring him up, now, when we’re doing this?’

‘Dom, you’re being silly. Okay, we’ll go outside.’

‘Forget it. Don’t bother.’

‘Dom.’ He got like this sometimes after a drink. Horny and passionate, but angry too. Alcohol loosened him in many ways.

‘I don’t feel like it anyway.’

She rolled across and grabbed him, squeezing. ‘Part of you feels like it.’

‘Maybe in the morning.’ He sighed heavily and turned onto his side, back to her.

‘What the hell?’ she asked. But Dom didn’t reply. His breathing was heavier, but she knew he wasn’t asleep. They knew each other so well. ‘Dom?’

‘Night,’ he said.

‘Yeah.’ She sighed heavily and pulled a single sheet up to cover herself. She wished she hadn’t mentioned Andy. In a darkness suddenly made uncomfortable, she remembered that one awkward moment between them a year before. Neither of them had mentioned it since, and it had grown into nothing more.

Emma fell asleep unfulfilled, dreaming of more dangerous times.

## Chapter Four

### Not You

Angry at himself, at Emma, and most of all at Andy, Dom wanted to make things right. But he was stubborn. Alcohol increased that stubbornness, and though he so wanted to roll over and apologise to Emma, he couldn't shake what she'd said.

*You sound like Andy.*

Why say that? When they're lying together, naked and familiar, his hand between her legs and hers around his hard-on? Why was that an acceptable time to tell him he sounded like his fitter, better-looking friend?

He could hear Emma's breathing, slow and even, and he guessed that she'd already fallen asleep. She would not appreciate being woken now.

*Don't always be a loser.*

He wasn't sure if he'd truly heard that from Andy. But the truth didn't really matter. He *thought* he'd heard his friend muttering those words, so in reality it was Dom saying it to himself.

*Don't always be a loser.*

'Fuck's sake,' he whispered into the humid, dark bedroom. He needed a drink of water. He couldn't decide whether he was more drunk than he'd believed, or dehydrated from the heat. If he moved he might wake Emma. He also needed to piss.

He lay there for some time, drifting in and out of a troubled doze. The day felt unfinished, still primed with wasted opportunities for lovemaking with Emma, and adventure with Andy. Settled sleep evaded him. Eventually the need to urinate forced him towards the en suite.

Emma stirred and rolled from her back onto her left side, groaning in her sleep, a deeply sexual sound. ‘... in the bath,’ she muttered.

Dom heard her even breathing and smiled. Maybe the next day he’d ask her about her dreams.

But dreams were the last thing on his mind when he woke the next morning.

He slept in, partly because it was Saturday, partly from the effects of the previous evening’s cider. Jazz woke him. She licked his face, and as he shoved her away the phone rang. It was one of his customers, Mrs Fletcher. Her electricity kept tripping, and she was desperate for Dom to come and sort the problem.

Emma was already up and dressed, ready to go and collect Daisy from the friend she’d stayed with the night before.

Dom was pouring coffee and waiting for toast to pop from the toaster when Emma said, ‘I was hoping we could go together.’

‘I really can’t say no to Mrs Fletcher.’

‘No. Sure. What about later?’

‘Later?’

Emma stared at him for a few seconds, and Dom didn’t like what he saw in her expression. It was like a stranger’s. She was

someone he didn't know assessing him, not the wife he adored. He felt a moment of frank appraisal, so intense that it made him feel uncomfortable.

Emma sighed lightly and looked aside, running a hand through her hair. As if she'd looked him over and found him lacking.

'Lucy's party.'

'Oh, of course, I'll be there. What time?'

'Two.'

'Right. Play centre, yeah?'

'Thirty kids shouting and screaming in a ball pit,' Emma said.

'The joy of parenthood.'

They orbited each other in the kitchen for a few more minutes, then Emma left first. She gave him a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

He wanted to say something about the previous evening. But the day was gathering velocity, things were moving on, and he was already thinking about Mrs Fletcher's electrical problem.

That, and something else. Sober, yesterday's discussions with Andy did not feel quite as he'd first experienced them. His friend had been probing, rather than plotting. Behind every 'No one will suffer' comment had been a deeper, blander thought – *Boring fuck. Stuck with the same woman for years. Drifting through life on the tails of those really living it.*

As Dom drove through Usk towards Mrs Fletcher's old cottage, he thought of Andy powering downhill ahead of him on his bike. Seeing the future first. Filling his face with the wind,

daring fate, while Dom tweaked his brakes, preferring the climb because it was more tempered, slower, predictable and safe.

By the time he'd reached Mrs Fletcher's, he'd already decided to text Andy.

*Got time for a coffee?*

And it was as if Andy was waiting for him, because his reply was almost instant.

*Sure. Where you at?*

Dom told him, named a time and a place, then grabbed his toolbox and went to work.

'I'm talking, you're listening,' Dom said.

He sat opposite Andy. They were in the outdoor area of the garden centre cafe, two coffees and a selection of cake slices already on the table. Andy had arrived twenty minutes before him, and Dom had taken childish pleasure in making his friend wait.

Andy held his hands up, then drew one across his lips.

Dom glanced around and sat down. The cafe was busy with the usual Saturday morning crowd of squabbling families, elderly couples, and a group of local kids drinking hot chocolate. A couple of dogs tugged on their leads and snapped thrown treats from the air. Tame sparrows and a robin hopped from table to table, causing squawks of delight from children and smiles from parents.

No one was paying them any attention.

'No weapons,' Dom said.

Andy raised his eyebrows.

‘No one gets hurt. We don’t lay our hands on anyone.’

‘Right,’ Andy said, nodding. ‘Of course.’

‘We hide whatever we take, leave it for a year.’

‘At least a year.’

‘Any inkling that we might get caught, any reason why it’s not as easy as you seem to think it’ll be, then we’re out.’

‘Sure. But it *is* easy.’

‘Right, yeah,’ Dom said. ‘But any sign that it won’t be, and it’s off. I have a beautiful family that I love very much. I won’t do anything that’s a risk to them or me.’

‘You do have a lovely family,’ Andy said. ‘You’re lucky. They’re why you’re doing this.’

Dom nodded. Yes, because of them. But as he drank some of his coffee, slowly, savouring the taste, he knew that wasn’t quite true.

This was all for him.

‘I’ll think it all through properly today,’ Andy said. ‘Get back to you tomorrow. A call, not a text. You spend the weekend with your family, all very normal.’

Dom’s heart was beating too fast. He was sweating. He was also excited, and pleased at his friend’s surprise. *He never believed I’d really do it*, he thought. But he would not say that out loud.

‘When should we go?’

‘No more for now,’ Andy said. ‘Cake. Coffee. Check her out,

over there.’ He nodded behind Dom.

Dom turned to look over his shoulder and caught the eye of an attractive young woman in shorts and T-shirt, just as she was looking their way. He glanced away, embarrassed, and Andy laughed.

‘Bastard.’

‘You know it. She’s giving me the eye, though.’

‘Jesus.’

‘I’ll be whoever she wants me to be.’

They chatted some more, but Dom’s mind was on one thing. He felt like he’d made a commitment, even though the deed itself still seemed distant and unlikely. He felt lighter.

His horizons had been opened to a new beginning, and it was time to start living.

‘Monday,’ Andy said.

‘Really? That soon?’

‘Why wait?’

‘So ... how?’

‘Bike ride tomorrow? We can chat then.’

‘Sure.’

‘I’ll be at yours about ten o’clock.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Have a nice evening, mate. Say hi to Emma for me.’

That Saturday evening, Dom played with Daisy in the garden while Emma cooked some chicken for a warm salad.

The weather was scorching, and Daisy wanted to play

Scrabble. Usually that bored Dom. Most games bored him, and he'd often feel more inclined to watch some TV with her, or perhaps encourage her to get some sketching paper out and keep herself occupied.

That evening, however, he felt different.

Later, with Daisy in bed, he brought out a bottle of Emma's favourite wine. She liked dry white straight from the fridge, so cold that it sometimes gave him brain freeze. They sat in the garden together and drank the bottle, then when they went inside around 10 p.m. he made them mojitos.

'A less suspicious woman would think you were after something,' Emma said.

'Innocent me?' Dom asked.

They made love on the sofa, moving to the living room floor when they became more energetic and the leather made too much noise. Jazz barked at them, and Dom had to jump up and shut her in the kitchen. Then he returned to his wife, and the heat didn't matter, the uncomfortable rug bothered neither of them. They came together.

Dom knew it was one of those evenings that would stay with him forever. A perfect time.

'I like today,' Emma said later when they were snuggled in bed. It was hot, but they both enjoyed the contact. 'It's a very not-like-you day.'

'Oh, thanks,' he said. But he was not offended. He liked her thinking that.

Soon they disentangled themselves and Emma fell asleep.

Dom took a lot longer to drift off. He spent a long time staring at the ceiling, thinking, and feeling not quite himself.

## Chapter Five

### Loony Tunes

‘Mad dogs and Englishmen,’ Dom said.

‘Huh?’

‘Go out in the midday sun.’

‘What the hell are you on about?’ Andy was in the driver’s seat. It was Dom’s car, but Dom had not wanted to drive. He’d muddied up his own number plates and stuck colourful sun blinds in the back to distract attention.

Andy had just switched off the engine and left the keys in the ignition. They’d discussed that. It was to aid a quick getaway.

‘It’s a saying. A song, I think.’

‘Dom, you’re not flipping out on me, are you?’

‘Nah. I’m good.’ But Dom really couldn’t decide whether he was good or not. His body wouldn’t let him. He felt sick, his stomach rolled like he wanted a shit, he had a headache, sweat soaked his T-shirt and shorts, slick against the car’s upholstery. It was due to be the hottest day of the year so far, with a forecast that records would be broken. Even this early, sunlight scorched the air so that he could see everything with a crisp, awful clarity.

‘Because this is your last chance,’ Andy said. ‘Last time either of us can back out. You know that, right? I explained? Once we get out of this car suited and booted, it’s on. No going back.’

‘Yeah, Andy, I’m fine. Honestly. Just nervous.’

‘Nervous is good. It’ll keep us alert. But you look petrified.’

Dom closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Andy let him, and he was grateful for that. Somewhere in the distance he heard the trilling of a kid’s bicycle bell, and it took him back thirty-five years to a childhood summer – playing cards taped between his Chipper bike’s spokes; TV footage of empty reservoirs with cracked beds; the smell of calamine lotion as his mother tended his sunburn. He took in a deep breath and the smell of sweat and latex snapped him back to the present.

‘So, you ready?’ Andy asked.

Dom looked past his friend, across the small square at the Blue Door cafe. This early in the morning there were only a couple of people there – an old man reading a broadsheet newspaper over breakfast, and a young mum with a pushchair. The table where the two of them had sat just three days before was deserted, and he imagined the ghosts of themselves there, watching in silent disbelief at what was about to occur.

‘Dom! You ready?’

‘I can’t believe ...’

‘Okay.’ Andy touched the car keys, but didn’t turn them. ‘This isn’t happening. Let’s go.’

Something panicked Dom. A sense of failure he didn’t want, the idea that this ridiculous, otherworldly moment of his life might suddenly be over. Confusion skewed his sense of self, so much so that he glanced in the mirror to make sure he was still

there.

*Don't always be a loser.* Those words sat with him, heavy, echoing. As did, *It's a very not-like-you day.*

'Wait,' Dom said. He picked up the child's Hulk mask in his lap and slipped it on. It took a couple of seconds to place the eyes properly. His breathing sounded close and intimate, and he'd never been so aware of its sound. Too fast, too light. He breathed deeply again. Then Andy slapped his leg as he opened the driver's door.

Dom opened his own door and stepped from the car, and from one breath to the next he changed his future.

The road was quiet, the small square still. The air outside was heavy, and only slightly cooler than inside the vehicle. He could smell cooking bacon, coffee, and dust, and the sun singed the already reddened skin of his forearms.

After a quick, nervous ride the previous day with Andy – including a roadside stop to discuss their plans – he'd spent the rest of the day in the garden with Emma and Daisy. They'd cut the lawn, dead-headed some rose bushes, and eaten a salad on the decking. He'd wanted it to be a normal Sunday. And it would have been, if today hadn't been at the back of his mind. 'Silly,' Emma had said as she watched him moisturising his arms that evening. He'd forgotten sun cream.

At least he'd had heat and sunburn as an excuse for not being able to sleep.

No one seemed to have noticed them. The post office had only

been open for an hour, and only a few of the display items were outside. The postmistress had been occupied accepting a delivery from the security van. The shop door was already blocked open in an attempt to keep the inside cool, and Dom heard tuneless whistling coming from the shadowy interior, and something else. The sibilant rhythms of a radio, song unidentifiable.

‘Two minutes,’ Andy said from behind his Iron Man mask. He went first, taking several confident strides and passing through the door. As he did so he lifted the carrier bag in his right hand, pointing its contents ahead of him.

Dom followed, drawing the smaller bag from his shorts pocket. It contained a chunk of wood, but it could have been anything. He entered just behind Andy, in time to see the postmistress standing behind the shop counter, eyes wide, lips still pursed in a silent whistle. The tune had died on her lips.

The radio still sounded from somewhere behind the shop. It sounded like Radio One, the sort of music Daisy listened to but which Dom thought of as noise pollution. He couldn’t imagine that this woman would choose that.

‘This is all going to be very easy and painless,’ Andy said. He held the carrier bag across his chest in both hands, like a soldier would nurse a rifle. ‘You understand?’

The woman nodded, glancing nervously back and forth between Iron Man and the Hulk.

The enclosed, glazed post office area was to the left, “Closed” sign still propped across the metal money tray beneath the glass

screen.

‘Fuse board?’ Dom asked. The woman pointed above the greeting card display. Dom glanced at the fuse board and noted the incoming phone line junction box next to it. Perfect. He nodded at Andy, then turned his back on him and the woman.

He felt sick. He held the bag away from his body so she would see it, then peered through the window between advertising cards and posters. He wondered whether he should close the door, couldn’t remember what they’d decided about that. Had they decided anything? Door open or closed? He started breathing heavier again, balls tingling, head pulsing.

Outside, everything looked fine. Across in the Blue Door’s garden the man turned a page of his newspaper, and the young mother had the child on her lap. Neither of them were looking his way.

A car passed by, a man in shirt and tie driving, jacket hanging in the back. He was talking into a mobile phone. *Stupid*, Dom thought. *He’ll cause an accident*. He tried to smile but it would not come.

‘We’re here for money, that’s all,’ Andy said behind him. ‘It’s not yours. You won’t be hurt, and you’ll even find a bit of fame from this. Being robbed by Iron Man and the Hulk. You can sell your story.’

‘What have you ...?’ the woman asked. Her voice was high, shaking with fear. Dom closed his eyes briefly, flushed with shame.

‘I have a sawn-off shotgun,’ Andy said. ‘My friend has a grenade. We’re not using them. Just carrying them. That’s all. Now, no panic buttons. No shouts. Just open the safe and we’ll be on our way.’

‘Okay,’ the woman said.

‘How much are you holding?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Money.’

‘Oh ... thirty-eight thousand.’

There was a pause, a silent moment with no movement or talking. Dom almost glanced back, but he kept watching the road and square, as they’d agreed. *You have to keep watch*, Andy had said. *That’s the most important job. Anyone looks like they’ve seen us, anything out of the ordinary, and we’re gone.*

‘Who’s up there?’ Andy asked.

‘My granddaughter. Teacher training day at school, so she’s here with me. Having breakfast in her room, listening to music. I tell her to turn it down but ... she’s only young.’

‘We’ll be gone before she knows we’re here. Now hurry.’

Dom felt suddenly, irrationally hungry. He hadn’t been able to eat breakfast, had told Emma that he’d grab something on his way to the builder’s merchants. And in half an hour he’d actually be there, buying some supplies and equipment for the kitchen rewire he was doing in Monmouth. Davey was already at the job, stripping old wires and first fixing. They’d been working there for two days the previous week, and the couple they worked for

were nice. They gave them a steady supply of biscuits and tea.

The smell of cooked bacon and coffee made his stomach rumble.

‘Hulk!’ Andy said, impatient, as if he’d already called his friend’s name.

‘All quiet,’ Dom said.

He heard the rattle of keys, the creak of an un-oiled door. Movement as Andy crossed to the post office area. Dom glanced at his friend’s back. Beyond, behind the glass screen, the woman was opening the safe. Andy had the carrier bag containing his lump of wood resting on the shop counter, angled through the doorway into the post office area.

One Direction started harmonising from elsewhere in the building. A young girl’s voice joined in, unaware that anyone other than her grandmother was listening. Dom smiled, but the smile fell into a frown.

‘Hurry!’ he said. It would be bad enough knowing what her grandmother had been through. Last thing he wanted was the girl coming down and seeing it. There was no knowing how she’d react. If she ran screaming into the street ...

Then they’d have to flee. That was all. No one was getting hurt.

‘Pile it into the post bag,’ he heard Andy say. ‘Yeah, coins too.’

Across the square, Sue had emerged from the Blue Door cafe, carrying a tray of cups and food. She deposited it on the paper-reading man’s table, then chatted to him for a while. She even laughed at something he said. Dom felt offended. She was

always so brusque with him and Andy. Maybe she really did hate cyclists.

He laughed, short and loud.

‘What?’ Andy snapped.

‘Nothing, nothing. It’s just Sue—’

‘Hulk, shut the fuck up!’ It was like a slap. His eyes stung like a berated child’s. Then he realised what he’d said, and why Andy’s reaction had been so harsh. ‘Out of there, now,’ Andy said to the postmistress.

Across the square, Sue went back into the cafe. The man stirred his coffee and picked up a sandwich, studying it before taking a bite. Dom wished he was sitting there now with Andy, talking bullshit and anticipating their ride back home. Not here. Robbing a fucking post office.

‘Okay, Hulk, we’re good.’

Dom pocketed the bagged chunk of wood and drew a pair of wire snippers from his other pocket. He had to stretch to reach the fuse board. One snip cut the phone line. It was probably pointless in this age of mobiles, especially with a teenaged girl in the house who was probably glued to hers. But for the sake of a second it was worth it. Then he opened the misted cover to the fuse board, flipped the switch that cut power to the building, and dug beneath the switch and snipped the wires within.

One Direction fell silent.

‘Nan!’ a girl called.

‘Okay,’ Dom said. The post office probably had a direct panic

line to the local police station, but that was five miles away in the nearest small town. At least the postmistress now wouldn't be able to activate the local alarm the second they left.

Andy shoved gently at his back and they exited into the blinding sunlight. Dom walked quickly around the front of the car. He had never felt so exposed, so scrutinised.

A Range Rover turned into the square and came towards them. Sunlight reflected from the windscreen, hiding whoever was inside. It slowed as it approached, then accelerated quickly away, swerving across the road and striking the kerb. It made a sudden left turn around the square and stopped outside the Blue Door.

'Don't worry, get in!' Andy said. He was already opening the rear door, dropping the heavy bag onto the back seat. Dom opened the passenger door, glancing back over his shoulder.

The Range Rover's door was open and a tall, grey-haired man stood beside it, shielding his eyes as he looked across the square at them. He was only thirty yards away, and Dom could hear the deep timbre of his voice as he shouted at Sue and the patrons of the Blue Door. The young mother was standing also, holding her toddler, half-turned as if to shield him or her from danger. The breakfasting man stood and dashed into the cafe so quickly that he knocked over a chair and spilled his coffee pot. It hit the ground with a loud metallic clang.

'Hulk!' Andy said.

Dom laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. 'Don't make me

angry!’ he shouted across the square, almost hysterical.

‘Mate,’ Andy said, surprised. ‘Come on.’

Dom dropped into the car and slammed the door, panting, hands sweaty as they clasped for the seatbelt. ‘We did it?’

‘Yeah,’ Andy said. He sat motionless for a beat, then ripped off his Iron Man mask. That wasn’t part of the plan.

‘Andy?’

No response. No movement.

‘Andy, what’s—’

‘Yeah, we did it,’ Andy said. He started the engine, slipped into gear and pulled away.

A white transit van entered the square ahead of them, screeching around the corner and veering across the road. Two figures sat in the front.

Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck.

‘Oh, fuck,’ Andy said. His voice sounded flat.

*What?* Dom thought. Maybe he even spoke it. He wasn’t sure.

Dom braced himself against the dashboard as Andy turned to the left, hitting the kerb so that one front wheel mounted the square’s small lawned area. The van nudged the car’s rear wing on the driver’s side, a glancing blow.

Another vehicle had skidded around the corner, close behind the transit van. A silver BMW. It passed so close to them that wing mirrors kissed.

Andy pressed on the gas. The Focus bounced down onto the road again and accelerated towards the corner around which the

van and BMW had appeared.

‘What the hell?’ Dom shouted. ‘Andy, what the fuck?’ He twisted and looked through the rear window.

The van had halted in front of the post office, slewed across the road. The passenger door opened and Bugs Bunny jumped out. He held a gun. Dom had no idea what kind, but it was big and ugly, and looked very real.

‘Andy ...’ he said.

‘I know.’

The BMW had stopped behind the van. Its driver’s window was down, and Roadrunner stared after them.

‘Andy, what’s happening?’

Andy stared back at the car and van. Then he said, ‘We’re getting out of here.’

Daffy Duck jumped from the van’s driver’s side and stood watching them go. Bugs Bunny was already through the doorway and into the post office. The van’s rear door opened and Jerry the cat appeared, also staring after the car. Jerry gestured, shouting, and Roadrunner’s head turned.

Then they were around the corner and the square was out of sight, and Andy accelerated away from the small village, heading towards the climb into the hills that Dom was so nervous of descending on his bike.

Dom shook. He needed to piss. He tried to take his mask off but his fingers felt numb, he couldn’t get them beneath the damp, stinking latex. He was suffocating.

‘Deep breaths,’ Andy said.

‘Deep fucking breaths?’ he shouted, voice muffled in the green mask. He worked his thumbs beneath the edge at last and tugged it from his head, edges pulling his hair and raking against his skin. ‘What was that?’

‘Trouble,’ Andy said.

‘They had guns, they were there to—’

‘Trouble coming our way.’ Andy was glancing back and forth between road and rear-view mirror, and Dom twisted in his seat. The silver BMW was tearing along the road towards them.

‘Oh, shit,’ Dom said.

‘You need to work with me, Dom. Got it?’

‘Work with you?’

‘You saw the guns. Whoever they are, they’re serious. You’ve lived here all your life, you know these roads better than me, so think how we can lose him.’

Andy knocked down a gear and pressed on the gas. The road was narrow and twisting.

‘Andy, maybe we should stop.’

‘Seriously?’ his friend said, risking a glance across at Dom. ‘You’re serious?’

Dom shook his head. He didn’t know. He couldn’t quite fathom what was happening, his brain could make no sense of things.

‘Dom! Nothing changes. We lose him then we’re away, we’re good, and we’ve got a bag full of money. We follow the plan.

Understand?’

‘How can we?’

‘How can we not?’ Andy said. ‘It’s done, mate. We’ve done it. No going back.’ He grimaced as he slammed on the brakes. Tyres screamed as they took a bend too fast.

Dom held his breath. Nothing was coming the other way.

The road started to rise into the hills.

‘Closer,’ Andy muttered.

Dom looked back. The BMW was so close that he could no longer see its number plate and grille. They must have been doing sixty, and the silver car was just feet from their rear.

Roadrunner’s madcap smile was fixed on him. The driver held up a phone, camera pointed their way.

*I took my mask off*, Dom thought. But it was too late now.

‘Dom, we’ve got two or three miles to lose him or stop him. After that we’re over the hill, out of the woods and we hit the main road. Once that happens, we’re screwed. Law will be coming. Helicopter pursuit, the works. What do you think, the tight bend at the top?’

‘What do you mean?’ Dom asked. He didn’t recognise this Andy, but he shouldn’t have been surprised. They were in a car chase. His friend was keeping it together.

‘This is our future,’ Andy said.

‘Yeah,’ Dom said, and he thought of Emma and Daisy. *His* future.

‘So, that bend? We know it, he doesn’t. Maybe if I take it fast

enough he'll lose control?'

'Better idea,' Dom said. 'Just after that there's a turn right, hundred metres before the pink house, narrow lane, looks more like a field gateway. It heads up into the woods. I used to mountain bike up there before I started on the roads.'

'You're sure?' Andy asked. He dropped down a gear again as the slope increased, then swept around the bend that opened onto the long, straight climb. He pressed on the gas and edged into the middle of the road.

Dom looked back. The BMW was so close that he expected an impact at any minute. He wasn't sure what model it was, didn't know enough about cars to know whether his Focus could outrun it, or at least stay ahead.

'Dom, hundred metres before the house? More? Less?'

'Bit more,' he said.

'Right. Bend's coming up in a minute. When I say, goad the hell out of him.'

'This is crazy,' Dom said.

'It's happening,' Andy said.

The engines roared. The BMW pressed in closer, surging forward. Andy drifted the Focus to the right, blocking the road.

'Okay,' Andy said.

Dom froze for a moment, feeling the unreality of things pressing in close. Then he gave Roadrunner the finger.

Andy swerved them around the bend, wheel juddering in his hand. Dom turned forward again and pressed back into his seat,

holding onto the seatbelt.

‘There, see it?’

Andy didn’t reply. He was concentrating. He slammed on the brakes, and the BMW hit their rear end, shoving them forward. Tyres screamed. The BMW fell back a little, and Andy flipped the steering wheel to the right.

The Focus’s nose drifted perfectly into the narrow lane’s mouth, and Andy immediately dropped two gears and floored it. Unable to make the turn, the BMW slammed into the raised bank behind them, missing them by inches. As they powered away, Dom saw steam burst from the silver car’s front end, its wing crumpled, windscreen hazed.

They soon rounded a bend and the pursuing car was lost from sight.

Andy let out a held breath, gasping a few times. ‘Result,’ he whispered. ‘You okay?’

Dom could not speak. He turned away, watching the hedgerows passing by. With a sick feeling in his stomach he realised that he’d have to go straight to Monmouth now, to work, chatting with Davey and talking about how best to get these wires here, those there, lifting floorboards and drinking tea and eating biscuits.

‘My car’s bumped,’ he said.

‘We’ll sort that. Leave it to me. You okay, Dom?’

‘Yeah. No. Who were they?’

‘Looney Tunes.’ Andy laughed. Dom joined in, high and

hysterical and sounding like someone he didn't know.

## Chapter Six

### Pillbox

For a moment everything was as it should have been.

Dom surfaced from dreams and dragged some of them with him, balancing them momentarily with reality. Awareness started to build – who he was, where he lived, everything that made him Dominic. The dreams withered and receded. He groaned and stretched, eyes still closed, joints clicking to remind him of his age.

Then he remembered the day before and wished he could fall back asleep. He groaned again, this one more like a deep sigh. *What have I done?*

Daisy screamed.

Dom sprang upright, sitting in bed swaying and dizzied.

‘It wakes!’ Emma said beside him.

‘Daisy!’ He threw the duvet off and sat on the edge of the bed. Everything felt wrong. Music pulsed from Daisy’s room, when he rubbed sleep from his eyes he saw Roadrunner with a human body, and downstairs their dog, Jazz, was whining.

‘Ease up, action man. She’s only singing.’

He glanced back at Emma. She was sitting back against her propped pillows, phone in hand, hair sleep-tousled, corner of her mouth raised in amusement. Daisy’s voice rose again, and Dom

slumped back into his pillow.

‘You call that singing?’

‘She’s got Muse’s new album. Trying to match that singer’s warble.’

‘He does *not* warble,’ Dom said, feigning hurt. It was a conversation they’d had many times before. He welcomed its familiarity.

‘Like a dog with its bollocks trapped in a gate.’ She muttered this, swiping something on her phone and attention already elsewhere.

‘He’s a rock god,’ Dom said. ‘Classically trained. Not my fault you have no taste in music, and your daughter has.’

From Daisy’s room the track ended and she fell silent. Jazz continued whining from the kitchen below them, eager to see them all. They were familiar morning sounds that made Dom feel almost comfortable.

Sunlight cast across him through a chink in the curtains, and when he relaxed back onto the bed and closed his eyes he saw that white van and silver BMW, cartoon characters hefting guns.

‘Feeling better this morning?’ Emma asked.

‘Yeah, think so.’ He answered without opening his eyes, scared that she’d see straight through him. She usually did. He’d told her he had a bad headache the previous evening, needing something to cover up the way he was acting. Weird, twitchy, unsettled. He’d even cancelled his usual Monday evening squash match with Andy, much to his friend’s disapproval. *We need to be normal!*

Andy had said to him down the phone. *I just feel a bit rough*, he'd replied, unable to say more because Emma had been sitting on the other end of the sofa.

They'd stuck to their plan. After driving back from Upper Mill to Usk they headed into the hills just before the small town, parking off a barely used lane. Dom had left a shovel there the day before on his way home from work. Distant sirens, source unseen, had been the only sign of police.

The old pillbox was almost subsumed by ivy and brambles, hidden in a small woodland that had likely not even been there during the war. They pushed their way inside, careful to disturb as little of the undergrowth as possible. The shadowy interior stank musty and old, as if the war years had hung around. A pile of rusted drinks cans in one corner, the body of a mattress almost completely rotted into the ground, a black bag burst and spilling decayed cloth insides, all paid testament to its last occupant from some time ago. There were no signs of recent use.

Andy had used his phone as a torch while Dom dug. Then they swapped over. It only took half an hour. As Andy dumped the heavy post bag into the hole, Dom realised that they hadn't even checked how much was there. They shoved the soil back over and patted it down, kicking the remaining turned soil into the corners. Dom used the shovel to drag the black bag across the floor. It came apart and spilled shreds of old clothing, and the stink as he dumped it on the covered hole made him gag. Things crawled away in the darkness, rustling dried leaves. He wanted

to get out of there.

He'd dropped Andy at a bus stop and then headed to Monmouth. He was only an hour late for work, and he told Davey that he'd swung by the merchant's to pick up some new tools. He had them ready in the car boot.

Their clients had made him a mug of tea and brought a plate of biscuits, and he and Davey had sat and chatted about things he could no longer remember. Then he'd worked. Then he'd come home. Dinner with Emma and Daisy, driving Daisy to her usual evening scout meeting, watching an episode of *Breaking Bad* with Emma instead of his usual Monday squash match. A hug in bed and then, after a long time, some troubled sleep.

And today was the first day of the rest of his life.

'I'll get the car looked at today,' he said.

'Should have called the police,' Emma mumbled, still distracted by her phone.

'It was a bump in a car park. Last thing they're interested in.' He'd been pleased to discover that damage to his car was minimal. The rear bumper had absorbed the force of the shunt, and where the van had touched them there was a scrape in the paintwork, nothing more. The wing mirror displayed no signs of any impact. It could have been so much worse.

'Still. Ignorant bastard, whoever did it.'

Dom opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, because with them closed he saw Roadrunner's leering face.

'Bloody hell,' Emma said. He felt her stiffen in bed beside

him. From across the landing Muse started again, the same song, Daisy's enthusiastic but imperfect voice singing along. 'Did you see this?' Emma asked.

'See what?'

'Upper Mill post office.'

Dom's blood ran cold. But of course it would be news. Locally, at least, if not nationally.

'What about it?'

'It was robbed yesterday morning. Whoever did it killed the postmistress and her granddaughter. How horrible. God, it's only thirty miles from here.'

'Killed them?' Dom sat up again, but this time it was much harder than before. Everything felt slow, his body heavy, an ice-cold shock around his heart giving way to hot lead running through his veins. Sweat prickled his brow.

'Yeah. Awful. Hope they catch the bastards.'

Dom couldn't stop blinking. His eyes stung, and perhaps between blinks he could reset things, put things right. He already knew that they'd crossed a line. Now, that line had been painted blood-red.

'Dom? Babe?' He felt Emma's hand on his arm and he leaned into her, kissing her cheek before standing from the bed.

'Bladder's going to explode.'

'Dom, what is it?'

He stood at their open door, looking out across the landing at Daisy's closed bedroom door. He'd heard the postmistress's

granddaughter singing. She'd sounded happy, carefree, like young kids should.

'I'm okay. Just a shock, that's all. Andy and I sat across the square from that place a few days ago.' He remembered the laughing woman. 'Might even have seen the post office owner.' He looked back at his wife, terrified that the truth of things would be painted across his expression, in his eyes.

'Yeah, it's horrible,' Emma said. She was scanning her phone again, scrolling slowly through the rest of the day's news, already moving on.

*And what will she see?* he wondered.

*The Hulk and Iron Man made off in a red Ford Focus just as their accomplices arrived, and soon after that the gunshots were heard.*

*The white van hit the red car.*

*It's possible that two separate gangs were involved.*

*The Hulk and Iron Man were carrying weapons hidden in carrier bags.*

'We didn't have weapons,' he whispered as he stood in their bathroom trying to piss. His bladder wouldn't let go. It was as if someone was standing behind him staring intently at the back of his neck, and he even glanced back over his shoulder.

'Daisy, turn that down!' Emma shouted. Daisy had turned up her iPod dock. Muse were rocking out.

Dom sobbed, once, and turned it into a cough.

'Put the kettle on, babe,' Emma called.

‘Yeah.’ He started to piss, but still felt eyes on him. That poor woman. Her poor grandkid.

He needed to speak to Andy.

‘Of course I’ve seen the news.’

‘We need to go to the police.’

‘And tell them what?’

‘What we saw.’

Andy didn’t reply for a few seconds. Dom could hear him breathing lightly, slowly, sounding in control. ‘Really, Dom?’

‘I dunno. It’s just ... they *shot* them, Andy.’

‘You haven’t actually read the news, then.’

‘No. Emma told me. Why?’

‘They made the kid watch while they smashed the woman’s skull with something heavy. Then they glued the girl’s nostrils and lips shut with superglue.’

Dom felt the world spinning, or he was spiralling while everything else was motionless. He felt sick. ‘Jesus fucking Christ.’

‘So you really want to go to the police, and tell them we robbed the post office then saw these other bad guys appear to finish them off?’

‘We didn’t kill them.’

‘I know that, Dom! But we’re the bad guys too.’

‘Not that bad.’

‘They’d never believe there wasn’t a link! We admit it, they don’t find the others, we’re guilty of murder.’

‘No,’ Dom said. ‘Nobody gets hurt. That’s what we said.’

‘Yeah, I know, mate.’

‘That poor girl.’

Andy sighed. The phone line crackled. ‘Hardly bears thinking about,’ Andy said. Dom stared through his windscreen across the car park. There weren’t many cars here this early in the morning, and soon he’d go to the local shop to buy his lunch for the day. But he was suddenly all too aware of the damage to his car’s rear wing. It was superficial, little more than a few scratches. He’d already cleaned the mud from his number plates and disposed of the brightly coloured window blinds. But even though he could see no one else around, he felt eyes on him, sizing up the car and taking notes, ready to connect it to the robbery.

*And then the white van hit the red car, Officer, and I’ve just seen it in Usk, I even know the guy who drives it, he’s an electrician and a governor at his daughter’s school and I’d have never expected that of him, not robbery, and definitely not murder.*

*He always seemed so quiet.*

*Such a nice family.*

*Nothing like that happens here.*

‘Got to get my car done,’ Dom said. ‘I don’t believe we were stupid enough to use it.’

‘It wasn’t stupid. We weren’t stupid. It was just bad luck.’

‘Bad luck that’ll get us—’

‘I know a guy who’ll do the car, up in Shropshire. I’ve already spoken to him, there and back in a day.’

'I can't drive to Shropshire, I have to work!'

'Which is why I'll do it.'

Dom frowned, thinking things through. His mind was a fog. He couldn't get anything straight, and if he tried to concentrate on one problem, all the others started battering at the edges of his consciousness.

'I just can't think straight,' he said.

'You don't need to. That's why I'm here. Get to work, go home tonight and hug Daisy. Have some wine, shag your missus. Everything's going to be fine.'

'Andy. Do you think if we hadn't done it, those others might have left them alive?'

Andy sighed heavily, and fell silent for so long that Dom thought the line had been cut.

'Andy?'

'That wasn't just murder. They enjoyed what they did to that girl. So I doubt it. No, they wouldn't have been left alive. We had no influence over what happened to them. Understand?'

'Yeah.'

'Sure?'

'Yeah. Andy? What if they come looking for us?'

'They'll be long gone by now.'

'How do you know?' Dom asked.

'Because I would be. Now what time can you get here?'

## *Chapter Seven*

### *A Quiet Life*

She was Jane Smith, the do-over woman, and upon waking every morning her new life built itself from scratch.

She relished those briefest of moments between sleep and full consciousness, when all she knew was the lonely warmth of the French gîte's bedroom, the landscape of bare grey stone walls, the roof light affording a view of the clearest blue sky, and the scents of summer drifting through windows left open all night. For that shortest of times she was free and carefree.

But reality always rushed in, as if she would suffocate and die without it. Her life was constructed around her and she pulled it on like a costume. Her name, her history, why she was here and where she had been before. It no longer needed learning and repeating, this new existence, because she knew it so well. She was experienced at living a lie.

Fragments of her old, real life always hung around, like stains from the past. But she did her best to restrict them to dreams, and nightmares.

She stretched beneath the single sheet. Her body was thin, lithe and strong, limbs corded with muscles. She enjoyed the feeling of being fit. There were hurdles to fitness, buffers against which she shoved again and again, but she enjoyed fighting them.

She knew that the more years went by, the harder it would be to deny the wounds and injuries. But for now they acted as badges of honour. Scars formed a map of her past, a constant reminder of her old life that made-up names and histories could not erase.

A spider was crawling high across the stone gable wall close to the sloping ceiling. It was big, body the size of her thumbnail, legs an inch long. She'd seen it before, usually on the mornings when she woke earlier than normal. It probably patrolled her room at night, secretive and silent and known only to her. She imagined it exploring familiar ground in search of prey, and perhaps it sometimes crawled across her skin, pausing on her pillow to sense her breath, her dreams.

It scurried, paused, scurried again, eventually disappearing into its hole until the sun went down. She liked the idea of it spending daylight out of sight. Its sole purpose was existence and survival. There was something pure about that.

She sat on the edge of the bed, stretched again, then walked naked down the curving timber staircase and into the bathroom.

She'd been living in the gîte in Brittany for a little over three months, and she knew its nooks and crannies probably better than the French owners.

In a slit in the bed mattress was a Glock 17 pistol. Tucked behind a stone in the stairwell wall was a Leatherneck knife. A loose floorboard in the bathroom hid a sawn-off shotgun and an M67 grenade, and downstairs on the ground floor, beneath a flagstone in the kitchen, was a small weapons cache containing

another pistol, a combat shotgun, and several more grenades.

Though aware of everything around her, Jane Smith did not think of these things now. Her life was as quiet and peaceful as she had ever believed possible. But none of this made her feel safe.

There was no such thing as safe.

She used the toilet, then went down the second flight of stairs to the kitchen. Kettle on, coffee ground, she watched from the kitchen window as the new day was birthed from the dregs of night.

Leaving the coffee to brew, she opened the wide glazed doors that led onto the gravelled terrace. Several rabbits sat across the lawned area beyond. One of them pricked up its ears and froze, but it did not run. Birds sang and swooped across the lawn, picking off flies flitting in the soft morning mist.

The sun would burn the mist away very soon, but for now it formed a pale haze across the landscape. The large lawned garden that sloped down to the woodland, the fields beyond, and past them the wide lake and the steadily rolling hills, were all silent but for the sounds of nature. She did nothing to disturb the peace.

Still, she would not step from the door without dressing. The chance of anyone watching was small. But if a local had walked through the woods this early, and had strayed from the public paths to the edge of the gîte's large property, she did not want to draw undue attention to herself. The quiet Englishwoman could

have been anyone. The naked Englishwoman would draw second glances, and discussion in the village bar-tabac, and a form of notoriety.

Jane Smith was well versed in keeping herself unnoticed.

She took her coffee upstairs, showered and dressed. Then she locked the house and cycled her old bike up to the small village of Brusvily. The patisserie was already open, and she smiled and exchanged a few words with the owner in her broken French. She was getting better, and she knew that the locals appreciated her efforts. They were used to British holidaymakers assuming that everyone spoke English, and she made a point of only conversing in French when she was away from the gîte. Just another way to try and fit in.

She bought croissants for breakfast, and bread rolls, ham and cheese for lunch. That afternoon she planned a run down through the woods to the lake, a long swim in its cool waters, then a hike along its shore to the nearest town. She'd eat dinner there, then perhaps run back the same way, depending on how stiff her hip was. If it was giving her grief, she'd walk.

Back at the gîte she brewed more coffee and sat beneath the pergola on the terrace, eating the croissants with strawberry preserve, drawing in the sights and sounds of summer. This had been a long, hot one, and the lawns were scorched dry by the sun and lack of rain.

*Her son, Alex, comes crying to her with a grazed knee, grass stains surrounding the scratches.*

Jane Smith paused only for a moment, last chunk of croissant halfway to her mouth. Her coffee steamed. A breeze sang through the corn crops in the neighbouring field and stirred the wild poppies speckling its edges like beads of blood on an abraded land.

She finished eating her breakfast and drinking her coffee, licking her fingers and picking up pastry crumbs from the plate. The memory was already gone. But every such memory was also always there.

This life was a thin veneer. Routine gave it substance, and repetition made it almost like being free.

But Jane Smith was more than one person. After brewing her third cup of strong coffee of the day, and still before nine in the morning, she picked up her iPad.

First she accessed Twitter. Her current account was under one of many pseudonyms, but it was time to change, so she opened a new account under a new name. A few quick posts about apple pie recipes, pictures of cakes, and a couple of funny cat memes, then she searched some cookery hashtags and friended a handful of random people. That done, she accessed five accounts that she liked to keep track of and friended those, too. These people were in her past, and though she'd made a promise to the few she liked, most would never want to see her again. She might have helped them, but in many cases she had corrupted and cursed them, too. Salvation came at a price.

She knew that more than most.

There were no messages there for her, secretive or otherwise, and nothing to raise her concern. She was glad.

She was *always* glad.

Leaving Twitter running in the background, she surfed other social media sites from a variety of fake ISP accounts. No name was her own, and none were those she had used in real life. Her net activity left no trail, and every relevant page or search was bookended with several random surfs.

Everything was quiet. That was how she liked it. She could have lived like this for the rest of her life, if her sense of morality allowed. It wasn't that she was always out for vengeance. She wasn't sure what it was.

*It's all I can do*, she'd think when she mused on things. And considering what she had been, and who she'd had, that was the most depressing thing of all.

When she started scrolling through the news sites and saw the item, and scanned the first paragraph, everything changed. Her stomach dropped, and she felt the familiar sense of change settling around her.

The calm reality of her life at the *gîte* became a facade. Ever since becoming the person she now was, she'd had the sense of the world beyond her horizons conspiring to draw her out and cut her down.

There were plans, conspiracies, machinations, and sometimes she even imagined vast machines working secretly beyond the hills and past the curvature of the Earth, great steam-driven

things that drilled and burrowed through the hollows she could not see, the places she did not yet know. They would connect like massive spider webs, drawing tighter and closer until there she was. Caught. Trapped by circumstance, and unable to look away.

All the horrors she had witnessed and experienced, and the terrors she had perpetuated herself, made looking away impossible.

‘Now here we are,’ she said. She read the whole article, picked up the phone, dialled. After four rings she disconnected, then she dialled again. He picked up after three. That way they both knew that things were well.

But not for long.

‘Have you seen the news?’ she asked.

‘I try to avoid it. Too depressing.’

‘There was a double murder in South Wales. A girl had her lips and nostrils glued shut.’

Silence from the other end.

‘Post office job gone wrong.’

‘So?’

She frowned. It was strange having this conversation in such calm, beautiful surroundings. *Over the hills*, she thought. *Past the trees. Machines turning and steaming, vast cogs grinding, dripping oil, casting lines to hook into my flesh.*

‘Don’t you care?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘But you’ve been waiting for something like this for years.’

Don't you want to ...' She trailed off. He always steered these conversations even if she started them.

'Take revenge? And how did that work for you?'

A slew of images flashed across her mind. None of them were nice. Her hip ached where she'd been shot in Wales three years before, stalking and killing the people of the Trail, the shady organisation responsible for her family's deaths. Her arm was stiff, muscles knotted and hard from another bullet impact. They'd shot her, but she had survived. Perhaps she'd even triumphed. But she didn't feel like a winner.

'It's a lovely morning,' she said.

'Beautiful. Anything else?'

She'd tried to get close to Holt over the past couple of years. He'd pulled her out of her alcoholism following the murders of her family, then he'd trained her, preparing her for vengeance. Even so, she knew that he'd shown her only a small part of what he had learned and experienced over the years. His history was deep, and bathed in blood and grief.

And all the time, every moment they were together or apart, Holt seemed totally in charge.

She hung up without saying any more. It was her own attempt to take control of the conversation.

Jane Smith, real name Rose, glanced at her watch and decided it was time for another coffee.

Rose ran.

She had never been a runner. It still felt like a new thing for

her. But since that time in the Welsh hills with Chris Sheen three years before, and the Trail, and the violence and pain that had resulted, it had become therapeutic. The Trail had selected Chris for a human trophy hunt, holding his family hostage to ensure he played ball. If he was caught and killed by the hunters, his family went free. If he escaped, they died.

It was the same terrible dilemma that Rose herself had once faced at their hand. She had escaped. Her family had not.

Chris had shown how running could keep you alive, and not just because you stayed ahead of those who meant you harm. It cleared the mind, flushed the veins, worked your systems. It was like a detox of the brain, gasping away accumulated ideas that were growing staid and stale. It drained thoughts that might do you harm. It was a form of freedom and serenity, when Rose rarely felt free, and to be serene was a state she had forgotten years before.

After leaving Wales, she had started with a few miles. She quickly became obsessed. When it was just her and her route, she might have been free. Now, she often ran eighty miles each week, but she never seemed to get anywhere she wanted to go.

Every step she took jolted up through her damaged hip.

*Take revenge? And how did that work for you?*

Holt knew how it had worked for her. Not at all. Killing the people who had murdered her family had done nothing to lessen the hollowness their loss had carved out inside her.

The grief was not tempered, the rage not calmed. It was

something she'd had to do, and he had been partly responsible for her achieving and surviving the task. But so many deaths by her hand had done nothing to make the past more bearable, nor the future more certain.

She dreamed of them less now, at least. Her husband and three children, slaughtered in that basement by the Trail, gone forever without any of them having a chance to say goodbye. But maybe that lessening of dreams was more down to the passage of time than anything she had done.

Sometimes, she wondered whether her killing spree had achieved anything at all.

Rose pounded down the sloping woodland trails towards the lake. There were public footpaths through here, but they were rarely trodden, and she let herself run free. She wore shorts and a vest, knobbly trail shoes, and brambles and nettles scratched and stung her legs, tree branches lashed at her bare arms and shoulders. She welcomed the pain. She never actively hurt herself, but whenever pain came she relished it. It was one thing she'd never talked about to Holt. Partly because it frightened her, but she was also terrified that he would nod, understand, and tell her that she was now just like him.

She didn't want to be like that. She didn't want to descend so far, become so lost. They had worked together several times since the hunt in Wales. She took jobs for people who needed her help, innocents who were suffering or naive people pulled into difficult situations. She liked to think she still had morals,

and that her sense of injustice drove her to do the things she did.

It was more complex than that, of course. Rose knew that well enough, but analysing too deeply scared her.

With Holt it was ... fun. He didn't need the money, and she could not even convince herself that he did those things to be closer to her, or to protect and help her.

She truly believed he enjoyed it.

By the time she reached the lake she was sweating heavily, panting, and her legs were burning. She turned left and followed the path along the shore, leaping a fallen tree, skirting around an area where the bank had collapsed into the water, arriving eventually at the small silt beach. The ground here was hard, the water having receded several feet due to the blazing hot summer they were still experiencing. Dropping onto the compacted sand, she kicked off her trainers and stared across the lake.

The other side was two hundred metres away, heavily wooded and rising beyond into a series of low hills. She'd circled the lake a dozen times before, a tough eight mile run that necessitated passing through several private properties. She was never seen or heard. Now, a group of kids larked on the shore and in the water directly across from her. Music was playing, a sibilant hiss, and they were jumping in from a tree that stretched out across the lake. Their laughter and delighted screams seemed to come from so far away.

Rose waded into the water, still in shorts and vest, and felt the slick bed closing around her feet. She jumped forward and

went under, and after surfacing she turned on her back and floated. With her ears below the surface the world was silent, cool, consisting of nothing but a burning sky. She drifted there for a while. Hardly moved. Listened to her breathing, the gentle pop of water in her ears, her world for now so close around her that nothing else seemed to exist.

*Molly, her sweet daughter, jumps into the pool, laughing as she surfaces, splashing Rose where she sits reading a book.*

Rose rolled onto her front and started swimming. She breathed every three strokes, keeping her eyes closed underwater. Swimming was her least favourite exercise, partly because of the pain in her right arm, but mainly because she did not feel totally in control. She never went far. Fifteen minutes of hard swimming and she left the lake, enjoying the coolness across her skin as the sun dried the water. Even before she was fully dry she slipped her trainers on and started running again, heading along the shore towards the eastern tip of the lake, and the small footbridge that crossed the narrow river that fed it.

She'd already decided what she had to do. It was too easy for Holt to dismiss her on the phone, and it had been six weeks since they'd seen each other face to face.

It took another hour to complete her run and return.

She showered quickly, and as she was crossing the spare room where she kept her clothing and kit, she caught sight of herself in the wardrobe mirror. Even now she sometimes surprised herself. She paused and stared at the stranger staring back. Thinner than

she'd ever been, leaner, stronger, she was also so far removed from the mother and wife who had let grief suck her into a well of alcoholic despair. Not a single drop of alcohol had passed her lips for over five years. Sometimes, the despair remained.

Even her dead husband, Adam, would have difficulty recognising her now. Her hair was shorter than it had ever been, spiked and dyed blonde. She wore green-tinted contact lenses. Her face was drawn, cheeks hollowed, and she'd lost every ounce of the fat that had given her what he'd called cherub cheeks. Laughter lines remained at the corners of her mouth and eyes, the scars of old smiles. Her left ear was pierced three times, and she wore a stud in her nose.

It was a diamond. She thought such luxury amusing.

She still carried the tattoo on her thigh. She'd had it because the woman who'd killed her family had it, visiting the same tattooist to glean what information she could. Laser treatment had never occurred to her. It was small, and would only be seen by those looking closely enough. Since her husband Adam, no one had.

She dressed in her cycling kit, locked up, and hit the road.

An hour later, approaching the small caravan that Holt had taken for himself, she was struck once again by how deserted it seemed. Holt fostered such an image, but she braked and paused by the small gate into the field, shielding her eyes and scanning the caravan and its surroundings. There were no signs of life.

She carried her bike across the ridged field. Its crop had

already been harvested, leaving only sharp stubble.

‘It’s me!’ she called. It was unnecessary. He’d already know who was there.

The door was locked. She knocked, using their code. Two knocks, five, one. No answer.

‘John?’ He was John Williams. She was Jane Smith. In public, on the phone, anywhere.

Convinced that she was alone, she took out her bike’s toolkit and flicked open the small knife. It took fifty seconds to pick the caravan’s lock. She was out of practice. It was something she’d feared when they decided to settle for a few months, that they would become rusty, complacent, soft.

Door unlocked, she opened it a crack and peered through. The failsafe he used when he was inside was disconnected. Anyone breaking in when he was in residence would take a shotgun blast to the face.

Inside, she could already see that he’d left in a rush. Anger coursed through her. He wouldn’t have changed his mind so quickly, that was for sure, and even as she’d called him he must have been packing and preparing to leave.

‘Holt, you bloody prick!’ she muttered. Whenever she thought she was getting close to knowing him, she realised he was more of an enigma than ever.

She couldn’t help feeling hurt. He’d seen the reports and chosen to go on his own, not with her. They’d never really been a team, but she liked to think they had become friends, working

together a few times since taking down the Trail's UK cell. She trusted him as much as she would ever trust anyone again. She believed in him.

He'd lied to her, left without her, and that smarted.

A small note was propped on the table, beside an empty water bottle. *Changed my mind*, it said.

'Yeah. Right. Bastard.' She sighed and sat outside the caravan, looking across the fields at the farmstead in the distance, and the sweeping patterns the breeze made in dozens of acres of crops.

It took only a couple of minutes to convince herself that she had to follow.

## Chapter Eight

### Manson Eyes

For the final few normal hours of her life, Emma followed a familiar routine.

‘Hurry up, you’ll be late for school!’

‘Okay, Mum.’

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, listening to Daisy humming along to something on her iPod. Every school morning was the same, and every morning her daughter was out of the door with seconds to spare. It was only her second week back in school following the summer holidays, but it seemed that this final year in primary school would be the same.

‘Come on! I’ve got to get ready myself, yet.’

‘Chill pill, Mum.’ Daisy appeared at the top of the stairs. Short and slight like Emma, but also possessing her mother’s athletic build and love of sports, Dom always said that Daisy was going to be a heartbreaker.

‘What?’ Daisy asked as she hurried downstairs.

‘You’re gorgeous.’

‘Like a princess?’

‘Gorgeouser.’

‘That’s not a word.’

‘It is. I’m your mummy and I say so.’

‘Mu-um!’ Daisy rolled her eyes. She hardly ever called Emma “mummy” any more, another milestone that had drifted by without them really noticing.

‘Got your homework and stuff for your art project?’

‘Yep.’

‘And you’ll walk straight home from school.’

‘No, I’ll go to town and go to the pub then go to the nightclub.’

‘And where’s my invitation?’

Daisy rolled her big blue eyes again. ‘Mu-um!’

‘Love you.’ Emma kissed her, opened the door, and watched the most precious thing in her world leave. She often watched Daisy down the driveway and along the street, knew she was embarrassed by it, but guessed that deep inside she also quite liked it.

Even so young, Daisy was quickly becoming her own person. She was growing into someone who made her parents intensely proud, but that couldn’t camouflage the sense that she was already leaving them.

Sometimes when Emma watched Daisy walking away, her heart ached.

She closed the front door and sighed. The house was suddenly silent, with no blaring music, hassled husband or singing daughter to stir the air. Emma didn’t really like the house this quiet. It sang with the ghosts of children unknown.

She had always wanted more than one child. It had taken three years of trying before Daisy was conceived, after being told by

doctors that she would probably never have babies. They'd tried for another without success, and now in their early forties she and Dom were still leaving things to chance. But she felt her clock rapidly ticking, and she was resigned to their daughter being an only child.

Secretly, she was sure that Dom blamed her, probably because in her darkest moments she blamed herself. She hadn't even known Dom in those wild few years she'd spent with Genghis Cant and Max Mort. He had been the steady rock further downstream in her future.

At the age of eighteen she'd fallen so easily into that life, attracted by the glamour of a touring band, the charisma of its lead singer, the carefree atmosphere and sense of freedom that came from being in a different town every week and a different country every couple of months. They'd never been huge, but they'd built a large enough fan base to enable them to tour constantly, make reasonable money from their regular albums, and buy and maintain a small tour bus.

This had been in a time before music was so easy to download for free, and album sales had been much healthier. Genghis Cant had played regular festivals in Germany, Holland and Denmark, and their touring had taken them as far afield as Greece.

Their bus had been called Valhalla. It became the centre of her life. She'd shared one of its bunks with Max for two years which she could now barely remember, and he had been more than willing to share his drink and drugs.

She'd once asked her doctor whether such intense substance abuse could have damaged her chances of motherhood. The doctor had only stared at her. She'd wanted to strike him, curse at him, because she didn't believe it was his place to judge, however silently. He couldn't acknowledge the way she'd pulled herself back up and out of that life. As quickly as she'd fallen she had risen again, hauled back home by her parents and then saved by Dom.

Those years were a blur now, a poor copy of a movie of someone else's life. She still caught occasional glimpses, and sometimes in dreams she was there again, although viewed from the perspective of comfortable middle-age those times were more nightmarish than daring and revelatory.

She was happy to leave them as little more than vague memories. While she acknowledged that she was a product of her experiences, there were plenty she preferred not to dwell upon.

One thing she hadn't lost, however, was her taste for guitar music.

After Dom left for work around seven thirty and Daisy was out of the door by eight fifteen she always had half an hour to herself to get ready for work. Today she chose Pearl Jam, washing and dressing to the evocative strains of Eddie Vedder. It was at these times, when she was alone listening to music, that she came closest to missing those old wild times.

After she locked the back door and went out to her car, she saw a Jeep blocking the end of the driveway. It was several years

old, a Cherokee, white and mud-spattered, tinted windows. She didn't recognise it, and she stared for a while, passing her keys from hand to hand and wondering what to do.

She pressed the button that unlocked her car. She could get in and reverse down the driveway, hoping that the driver would see and move aside. Or perhaps she should walk to the Jeep and knock on the window.

The tinted glass made it difficult to tell whether there was even anyone inside. The vehicle hadn't been there when Daisy had left for school, so it must have pulled up while she was showering and dressing.

*I left the back door unlocked,* she thought, mildly troubled.

As she started striding along the driveway, the Jeep pulled smoothly away. Emma frowned, shrugged, jumped in her car and reversed out onto the road.

She waved to a couple of people she knew in the village as she passed by, then hit the main road. The radio news came on, and she was shocked once more by the post office slayings headline. Police were appealing for witnesses. A silver BMW had been found several miles away, but they were still searching for a white van and a red Ford. *Narrows it down to about a million vehicles,* she thought.

By the time Emma reached the college ten minutes later she'd forgotten all about the Jeep.

Emma enjoyed her job. It wasn't a traditional career choice, and when some people heard what she did they occasionally

frowned, as if wondering why anyone would actually *want* to be a Student Welfare Officer. But she loved people. She interacted with dozens each day, and she was well liked by the college staff and pupil population alike.

She had her own office with a small desk, a laptop, and a comfortable and informal area for when students wanted a heart-to-heart. She spent most of her time whilst in the office seated here, whether with a student or on her own. She even got to choose the furniture herself.

Dom earned more than her. But he worked far longer hours, and some days it was just him and Davey. He was a nice enough kid, but hardly a conversationalist.

Sometimes that suited Dom, because he was at home with his own company, but to Emma that was the idea of a nightmare. She was a sociable creature. Added to that the pressure exerted on Dom from running his own business – the invoicing, estimating, and other admin tasks that went with it – and her job was a breeze.

Emma spent that morning speaking with a couple of students who'd fallen heavily for each other and had an accident. Got carried away, forgot a condom. The boy seemed more embarrassed than the girl, but Emma had shrugged and said, *That can happen to anyone*. She was good at putting students at ease, however difficult the situation they brought to her, and her conversational manner always put them on the same level.

They'd left in a better frame of mind, with instructions to go

to the doctor's for a morning after pill, and after promising to ensure they used protection in future.

After that, an older student came for a chat about workload, and Emma listened while he talked. There wasn't much she could offer, but he smiled and said that she'd helped a lot. He had long dreadlocks and piercings, and reminded her of Dog Bolton, the guitarist from Genghis Cant.

She decided to drive out to a local garden centre for lunch. The Hanging Garden had a fantastic cafe attached, and their quiche was legendary. She had no afternoon appointments, so she took her laptop, intending to spend a couple of hours after lunch catching up on some work emails and form-filling. The sun was blazing, they had a garden with shaded tables and several water fountains, and she was prepared for a warm, relaxing afternoon's work.

Stepping out of the main college building, the heat really hit her. It was a true Indian summer.

She paused outside the revolving doors and took in a few breaths. Sweat prickled beneath her summery dress and across her nose. She squinted into the light, waiting for her eyes to become accustomed. She loved this weather much more than Dom, but after spending several hours indoors it always came as a shock.

Heat haze shimmered across the expansive college car park, blurring some of the vehicles parked in the distance. It rose from metal chassis as if every car had only just parked. Her car was

halfway across in one of the staff areas, and as she neared it she saw the Jeep.

It was parked on the access road, idling, exhaust fumes hanging low and dense in the heavy air. Its nose was pointed towards the exit, rear end facing her. Sun glinted from its raised windows. Whoever was inside was taking advantage of the air conditioning.

She shielded her eyes, tried to make a point of standing still and looking. Was it the same vehicle? It was white, and she *thought* it was a Cherokee, but the heat haze made the air between them fluid, confusing shape and distorting sharp edges. It must have been a hundred metres away.

Emma walked a couple of steps and the Jeep crept ahead, very slowly.

She stopped. It stopped.

Shock pulsed through her chest. *What is this?* More disturbed than she wanted to let on, she turned her back on the Jeep and jumped into her own car. Starting quickly, she reversed and aimed in the opposite direction before glancing in the mirror. It was still there, still idling. She dropped into gear and moved away, heading for a maintenance exit at the far corner of the car park. It was a rough lane and not really for casual use, but some of the staff used it at busier times.

‘Stupid,’ she muttered, opening every window in an attempt to swish away some of the baked air inside. By the time the air conditioning fired up she’d be at The Hanging Garden, so she

resigned herself to getting sweat-sticky.

Once out on the road, she found herself glancing in the mirror more than usual. She considered just why someone might be following her. She came up with nothing.

Occasionally a student became fixated on a teacher or other staff member, and once or twice she'd been involved in one of these cases in her professional capacity. But no one had been coming to see her more than usual; she'd noticed no undue attention. She was pretty sure none of the students who drove to college used an expensive vehicle like that. It was a few years old, but probably still worth twenty grand

*'Fucking stupid,'* she said, and talking to herself was a sign that the Jeep had truly unsettled her.

She drove faster than usual back into Usk, then through the town and out along the river. The roads were lunchtime- busy, but there was no sign of the Jeep. She considered calling Dom, but they rarely chatted during the day. A few texts sometimes, but casual chat was kept to a minimum. They were both busy, and there were no regular break times to catch up. Besides, what would she say to him?

Half a mile from the garden centre there were traffic lights. An area of road had been coned off and excavated, curls of blue pipework piled on the verge. No workmen were present. She stopped at the red light as cars passed from the opposite direction.

A supermarket delivery van pulled up behind her. The driver

was singing, bobbing his head and performing as if no one else could see him. In her side mirror she could see back along the road, and a couple of other cars slowed behind them. Then a flash of white and the Jeep was there.

‘Shit,’ she muttered. This was crazy. Dom preparing to show her a new car he’d bought as a treat? No, that was unlikely, and throwing a surprise like this wasn’t like him. Besides, he’d had to leave early to get the dinked Focus fixed.

It was someone from the college coming for lunch, that was all. Usk was full of cafes and restaurants, but The Hanging Garden was picturesque and had great food, and was a firm favourite.

‘Different car,’ she said. ‘Get real, Jayne Bond.’ Sitting there in her idling car, the heat felt more oppressive than ever.

The lights turned green. She dropped into gear, and from behind she heard the heavy, angry roar of a vehicle accelerating. She’d pulled across the white line by the time the Jeep flashed past, missing her wing by inches.

‘Prick!’ She stamped on her brakes, jarring to a halt and readying for a crunch as the supermarket truck hit her from behind. There was no impact. The Jeep roared past the roadworks, then its brakes glared and smoke breathed from its wheels as it slewed across the road. Its back end slid around, almost embedding in the hedge. It rocked to a standstill.

Emma was panting. She glanced in her mirror at the cars behind.

The Jeep's driver's window powered down.

The man was staring right at her. He rested his left hand on the steering wheel, right elbow on the windowsill. He was expressionless, and even from this far away his eyes seemed to pierce to the heart of her. He was anywhere between forty and sixty, with masses of wild, curly, unkempt hair streaked with grey, and a big beard that filled his face and almost reached his chest. One finger of his left hand tapped the wheel, and she wondered what music he was listening to.

Emma rarely judged by appearances. The people she'd mixed with during her tumultuous early years had left her very open-minded, and in her day job she often met caring, sensitive and intelligent students with more art on their skin than a gallery, more metal in their faces than a robot. It was what existed on the inside that mattered.

This man scared her. He looked truly wild, but it was also in the way he stared. At her. There was nothing in his eyes, no expression on his face. No glimmer or hint of what he was thinking. *Charles Manson eyes*, she thought, no idea where the image came from.

He didn't even appear to blink.

'Motherfucker,' Emma muttered. It was her favourite extreme curse-word. She drove forward, aimed directly at the Jeep fifty metres ahead. She had no intention of ramming it. She wasn't really sure what she intended, but the man's stare felt like an assault, and her aggressive reaction was pure instinct.

The Jeep straightened and powered away. The driver's expression hadn't changed at all as he looked away, and a second later he was out of sight. The Jeep was much faster than her car. Even so she followed faster than she should have, watching its tail end moving quickly ahead until it disappeared around a bend.

She slowed as she approached the bend a few seconds later, breathing a sigh of relief when she cleared it and there was no sign of the white vehicle.

Two minutes later, parking in The Hanging Garden's car park and switching off the engine, she gripped the steering wheel and took several deep breaths. Her sweating wasn't only due to the heat.

'Just some nutter,' she said. Then she shivered. *Someone walked over my grave.* It was a weird saying her mother used to use, and it had always spooked the hell out of her.

She pulled out her phone and called Dom.

## *Chapter Nine*

### *Soft Bitch*

Dom made several mistakes in work that day.

The worst was when he sliced his thumb with a Stanley knife. He bled all over his client's new kitchen floor, dabbing up blood with a dust cloth as he held his wounded hand over the sink. He swilled the cut and examined it. He probably needed a stitch or two. Instead, he waited a while, then wound a handkerchief tightly around his thumb, held in place with several loops of insulating tape.

The house they were working on was on the side of a hill above Monmouth town, a big, sprawling place that had been extended several times. The owners kept out of their way, other than the frequent tea and biscuit supplies, leaving him and Davey to get on with things.

Dom liked that. Because the job was quite spread out he'd spent most of the day on his own. His phone being without reception was an added bonus.

He'd needed time to think.

He left just before four in the afternoon, taking the van to pick up supplies for the next day. It would be their final day on the job, and Davey wanted to stay later that evening to get things close to finished. It would mean more overtime payments, but

Dom was happy with that. Even more so when Davey said his girlfriend would pick him up when he was done.

Heading along the winding driveway, out into the lanes, and down the hill towards the town splayed across the river plain below, his phone started to chime and beep. He'd have expected three or four notifications, but the frantic flurry of sounds communicated real urgency.

He stopped in the next field gateway and left the engine running. He was already soaked in sweat from the van's sauna-like interior, but seeing the notifications on the screen caused a chill. Four missed calls from Emma, three from Daisy and one from Andy.

His heart jarred in his chest, causing him to cough. He suffered from mild palpitations sometimes, nothing to worry about his doctor had said, ease back on the caffeine and stress. He gripped the wheel and coughed again, and when his heart had settled into a worried gallop he called Andy.

'What's happened?' he asked as soon as his friend answered.

'Car's fixed,' Andy said.

'Nothing else?'

'Like what? I'm on the way back, just stopped for a drink. It's like Death Valley out there.'

'Emma and Daisy have been trying to call, I've been out of service.'

'So have you called them back?'

'No. Only you. I thought something ...' He trailed off, closing

his eyes and trying to calm down. Sweat trickled down his temple. When he opened his eyes again, they stung.

‘Dom, you need to call your family. See what they want. Then go home and get pissed in your garden. Just ... chill.’

‘Chill,’ Dom said, chuckling.

‘I can drop your car down this evening, if you like.’

‘I’ll pick it up from yours. I’ll park the van in the town car park, get Davey to collect it in the morning.’

‘It was three hundred quid.’

Dom was stunned silent.

‘Joking,’ Andy said. ‘Text me later, mate. Fucking hot, isn’t it?’

‘Steaming. Thanks, Andy.’ Dom signed off, then dialled Emma’s phone. He was almost calming, almost breathing normally, on the verge of enjoying the heavy summer heat and the buzzing of bees, the stunning views down over the town and river, and the idea of sitting in the garden polishing off a bottle of Pinot that evening.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ Emma shouted as soon as she picked up.

‘Babe?’

‘Why haven’t you been answering—?’

‘No reception. You know my phone’s dodgy at this place.’

‘You should have phoned! You should have ...’ She was so angry it sounded like she was crying. Emma hardly ever cried. ‘Should have given me their landline number, Dom.’

‘What’s happened? Slow down and tell me.’

‘Nothing, nothing really.’ She sighed heavily, anger settling as quickly as it had exploded. But a cool hand was clutched around Dom’s spine, twisting and turning so that the world around him swayed with it.

‘Emma, what’s wrong? Daisy tried calling me too.’

‘I’m in You For Coffee with her now.’

‘I thought she was going to Lauren’s after school?’

‘She did, then Lauren and her mum came into Abergavenny with Daisy. Daisy called me to come and pick her up, she said she’d wait in the park for me. Lauren’s mother bought her an ice cream.’

‘She left her alone in Abergavenny? She’s only eleven!’

‘Dom, she’s been to town before, and waited until I picked her up.’

‘Right. So what’s wrong?’

‘Daisy was on her phone. A woman walked up to her, like directly to her across the grass. Daisy says she looked up to see what she wanted, and the woman just stood there staring straight at her. Then she said, “Soft bitch,” and walked away.’

‘What? What woman? Why?’

‘I don’t bloody know!’

Dom heard Daisy say something in the background. She and Emma mumbled something, then there was a scratching sound and her daughter came on the line. ‘Dad?’

‘Honey, you okay?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine. But that woman was scary. Really grinned

a lot, almost laughing. Like Mum just told you, she said “Soft bitch,” and then walked away. Really slow. She wasn’t worried about anything, you know? Didn’t think I’d stand up to her or anything.’

‘Did you know her?’

‘Never seen her before. She smelled of sweat, though. Real stinky.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘Left the park, tried to phone you, rang Mum and then came to the coffee shop. Do you think she knows the man in the Jeep?’

‘What man? What Jeep?’

‘Oh, hang on, Mum hasn’t ...’ She trailed off and Dom was left with a quiet phone, more rustling in the background, distant voices.

‘Emma? Daisy?’ His voice was raised, almost shouting, and the car’s interior suddenly felt claustrophobic. When he drew in the humid air was it was devoid of oxygen. Throwing the door open, he almost fell out onto the road. The tarmac was hot and sticky. The air was so still that even the birds seemed too lethargic to sing. The landscape held its breath, and through the phone jammed against his ear he heard only the background sounds.

‘Emma!’ he shouted again, and then she was there.

‘Some guy in a Jeep. I think he’s been following me.’

Dom closed his eyes. The Loony Tunes had been in a van and a BMW, not a Jeep. The crashed BMW had been found, but not the van. And they were proper criminals, armed and

dangerous, so of course they wouldn't use their own vehicles to do the robbery.

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