

PROLOGUE

He liked the sight of liquefying wire. The way he could alter something so dramatically, it filled him with hope for the future. Sharp fumes from the soldering iron rose up, causing his nose and lips to twitch. It was the closest he ever strayed to a smile.

The space where he worked had been a garage, once. But it had housed no car in a long time. This was where his tools were hoarded. Full cabinets and crowded shelves. A workbench pock-marked by years of hard labour, its edge clamped in the iron grip of a vice. Next to it towered a vertical drill, the machine's bit pointing down like a cruel proboscis.

The garage was windowless. Hanging from a peg on the side door was a courier driver's uniform: plain navy trousers and a matching jacket. Insignia on the sleeves and a silver winged logo above the chest pocket. Small details that gave the impression of someone official. He'd purchased it from a fancy dress shop in Chicago for \$39.99.

Suspended above his head was a double strip light, its contented hum only showing itself during pauses in the programme playing on a nearby radio. The presenter asked a question in his mature, measured tones. The studio guest's voice, in contrast, was shrill and increasingly insistent.

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There can be no flexibility on this. Absolutely none. How could a society that classes itself as civilized even consider it? I mean really, how could it? The whole thing is just another example of the victim-blaming that occurs every day in our male-dominated—

He pressed a button, cutting her off mid-sentence. He hoped for some relief, but as the song playing on the next station wound to a close, the DJ began to speak. The female DJ.

Sorry if I'm harping on about this, listeners. But ten litres of wine, per person, per year? Just tipped down the sink? Ten. Litres. I'm getting quite emotional here. Those bottles weren't half empty, people, they were half full! Oh, oh, the sheer waste! Lara, in Timperley, has texted to say that she sometimes pops the cork on a red, only to realize—

He clicked again, more aggressively this time. The radio fell silent.

Annoying loud bitches, would they never shut up?

He let the quiet settle in then turned his attention back to the console. It was a little larger than those used by genuine delivery drivers, and he'd sheathed its casing in rubber, just to be safe. But a casual observer would never know the difference.

Its upper surface was dominated by a glass touchscreen. This was where they'd believe a signature was required. The stylus for writing it was metal. A wire ran through the coiled plastic cord attaching it to his creation. That wire then connected to a row of nine-volt batteries concealed in the casing.

The beads of solder he'd just applied had now cooled. The Royer circuit he'd built inside it was complete. Further along the workbench was a polystyrene block. Embedded in the block was a metal coat hanger bent into the shape of an upturned hand.

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The clips of a meter had been attached to what represented the thumb. Everything was set.

He put his glasses on and took a breath in, composing himself. Then he lifted the console clear and spoke politely to the wall. 'Delivery, madam. Yes, for this address. If you could please sign for it here.'

He slid the stylus from its holder and laid it across the palm of the improvised hand. The internal mechanism of the stylus had been taken from a 100,000 volt Micro Stun Gun he'd purchased during the same trip to Chicago the previous month. He'd booked his flight the day after receiving final confirmation that his employment had been terminated at the college in Manchester where he'd worked for the last twelve years.

He regarded the stylus for a moment longer then pressed a button hidden from view on the device's underside. A bright blue flash lit the room and the stylus jumped up as if trying to yank itself free of the plastic leash.

He calmly put the console back on the mat, took his glasses off and leaned forward to read the meter.

4.21 milliamps.

Enough to send an adult female flying backwards. Enough to send her crashing to the floor, completely powerless. Enough so he could then silence her. Forever.

ONE

A head poked out of the door and looked left then right. 'In you come, ladies and gents, boys and girls.'

The officer who'd spoken was well in to his forties, veins in his temples accentuated by a haircut that had left little more than fuzz.

Sean Blake got to his feet, as did the rest of the group. They glanced awkwardly at one another, each of them clutching a cardboard box. Who was going first?

'Jesus,' the officer sighed, a palm pressed against the door to stop it swinging shut. 'Marko, lead the way, will you?'

The person beside Sean immediately stepped forward and disappeared into the incident room. Sean glanced at the remaining two people. As both were female, he took a step back to let them through first. But the nearest one – who he guessed was about the same age as him – gestured with her chin. 'You're the detective.'

With a shrug to show he didn't think that trumped manners, Sean stepped into the noise beyond.

The incident room held over a dozen workstations: cups, photo frames, paperwork and other paraphernalia scattered around most of them.

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An officer on the far side of the room stood. 'Anyone got a Samsung charger I can borrow?'

'Christ, Ted. Again?'

'Yeah, sorry.'

Troughton pointed. 'The two empty ones, over there, in the far corner. Ladies, civilian support is off to the right. I think your table's the last one.'

As Sean followed his fellow detective constable across the room, he could feel the eyes of the other officers settling on him. His black brogues, not even two days old, had his toes in a terrier-like grip. *Shit*, he thought. *You're walking like a weirdo. Stop it.*

The other detective had broad shoulders and a confident way of moving. At about six foot two, he was a good four inches taller than Sean. The difference in height made Sean even more aware of his own stocky build: when feeling uncomfortable, he tended to hunch forward. He knew it made him appear defensive or wary. Even a touch aggressive.

Beside one of the workstations was a window. His new colleague made immediately for it. Box held above the desk, he glanced back. 'You OK with that one? When I was here before, they had me sitting here.'

Sean took a quick look at the rejected workstation. A filing cabinet butted into the space beside the chair. Definitely the arse end of the deal. The other detective's assumption rankled with him. 'No.'

He'd already placed his box down. 'Sorry?'

From the corner of his eye, Sean saw the nearest two detectives' heads turn.

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‘This side has miles less room. I don’t really want it, either.’

‘Oh.’ The other detective’s hands stayed on his box.

Sean plonked his on the chair and extended a fist across the desks. ‘Rock, paper, scissors?’

‘Rock . . .?’

‘You never played it?’

‘Yeah, but years ago—’

‘On three, then. Come on.’

Reluctantly, Wheeler lifted his knuckles.

Sean checked the other man’s eyes. *He’ll choose rock*, he thought. *People used to getting their own way usually do*. ‘One, two, three.’ He straightened his fingers to signify paper.

The other detective only had a middle and forefinger extended. Now smiling, he made a snipping movement.

Shit, Sean thought. ‘It’s yours,’ he stated, transferring his box to the desk. ‘I’m Sean Blake, by the way.’

‘Mark Wheeler.’

They were still shaking hands when the officer who’d directed them across appeared. ‘Right, you’ve been given your login details before coming up here?’

They both nodded.

‘Good. Marko, I don’t need to give you the low-down of where things are.’ He paused. ‘In fact, you can let Sean know. It is Sean, isn’t it?’

He gave a nod.

‘I’m Inspector Colin Troughton, office manager. You’ll be dealing mostly with me. Marko, how did that last rotation of yours go? What was it again?’

‘Financial investigations, over at Chester House.’

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‘But you preferred the hustle and bustle of the Serious Crimes Unit?’

‘Any day.’

‘Well, you obviously made the right impression when you were here. Congratulations. And, Sean—’ the man’s voice underwent an almost imperceptible shift – ‘I gather this is also your first stint as a detective constable?’

‘Yes, sir. It is.’ He caught the glint of something in the other man’s eyes. Amusement, perhaps? Probably, Sean concluded, guessing his tie was wonky or a tuft of his wavy black hair was sticking up; it was usually doing something it shouldn’t.

‘There’s a briefing in ten minutes, so get yourselves sorted out. I’ll check the girls know what they’re doing.’

Sean didn’t sit down; his eyes had been drawn to the noticeboard on the end wall. A pair of photos dominated the display. The faces of two women. He already knew their names: Pamela Flood and Francesca Pinto. Pamela Flood’s body had been found five days ago in the front room of the flat she rented. She was in an armchair in the front room, but that hadn’t been where she’d died. Lividity beneath the skin of the buttocks and abrasions under the armpits suggested she’d been dragged into the front room and propped in the chair post-mortem. Unusual, but nothing more than that. What had pushed her death into the category of bizarre was the fact her mobile phone had then been forced so far into her mouth, it had lodged at the back of her throat.

‘Hear the detail about Francesca Pinto they’re holding back on?’

Sean looked across the desks. Mark flicked back his fringe of blonde hair then beckoned him towards the noticeboard.

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From the facial photos alone, the contrast between the two women was obvious. Francesca Pinto looked well-off. Her skin was clear, make-up tastefully done, hair properly styled. She had been smiling when the photo – probably sourced from a partner or family member – had been taken. Her teeth were white and even. Something worth showing off. She also looked about ten years younger than Pamela Flood, though, Sean knew, they were almost the same age.

Pamela Flood looked like she'd had just about enough of life. Her skin sagged and her eyes were dull and tired. Dark curls – too regular to be natural – hung low over her forehead and each ear. Her mouth was partly open, even though she wasn't smiling. Her bottom row of teeth was visible, and they looked more like a row of rickety fence posts. Brown and with gaps.

Francesca had been found two days ago. The fact her body had been arranged in the same way as Pamela's had led to the investigating team's rapid expansion – and the two detectives' arrival that morning. Sean came to a stop beside Mark. 'Her phone was also in her mouth, wasn't it?'

'Yeah,' Mark replied, hands in pockets, eyes on Francesca's face. 'But her handset was a newer model. Bigger.'

'Bigger?' Sean glanced at his colleague, wondering how that was significant.

Mark nodded. 'To fit the phone in her mouth, her tongue had been cut out. No sign of it at the scene.'

TWO

Sean saw the number on his phone's screen and felt his shoulders sag. Mum. Ringing now, of all times. His new appointment was letting her relive her own time in the police . . . still, ignoring the call was unthinkable: she might need help. The familiar procession of grim possibilities started to parade through his mind.

Mum sprawled on the kitchen floor, her walking frame on its side.

Mum marooned midway up the stairs, the chairlift having stopped working.

Mum stranded at the end of the front door's ramp, the batteries in her wheelchair dead.

He was glad Mark Wheeler was still over at the noticeboard, now talking with a couple of detectives he must have met during his previous rotation. Turning his seat so he was facing the filing cabinet, Sean accepted the call. He could hear a low rumble and, above that, a knocking sound. It was growing more urgent. 'Mum? Everything OK?'

'Sean? Are you there?'

'Yes, Mum.' The usual surge in his temples as his heart began to thud. 'Can you hear me?'

'Oh, there you are. It's clearer now.'

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'I said, is everything OK?'

'I'm on a bus, surprise, surprise. There's a terrible rattle each time we pull away. The driver says it's the panelling.'

The noise subsided.

'That's better. Can you hear me?'

He sat back, tension melting. 'So you're all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

Checking no one was close enough to hear, he whispered, 'Mum, it's my first day.'

'That's why I'm ringing! To wish you luck.'

'You already did that. This morning, before I set off?'

'Well, yes. But still. So, you're there, in the incident room?'

'Yes.'

'Have you got your own work space?'

He focused on the filing cabinet inches from his face. 'Kind of.'

'And there's only one other DC brought in, aside from you?'

'Mum, I'll tell you all this later.'

'It's just . . . I'm so proud of you, Sean.'

He glanced over his shoulder. Mark was walking back towards their desks. 'Thanks. There's a briefing in about twenty seconds. Got to go.'

'Of course. Is everyone there? Who's doing the briefing?'

'Talk later, bye.'

JANET BLAKE CONTINUED TO LOOK at the screen of her phone even though the call to her son had ended. Detective Constable Blake. He'd kill her if he knew that's how he was now listed in her phone. Smiling to herself, she recalled the look of amazement

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and joy on his face when he'd been notified that, within just two months of completing his aidship to become a detective, he'd been allocated a place in the SCU, with a team working a double murder.

That smile slipped slightly when she reflected on the phone call she'd made to her old colleague at Ashton station, Tony Shipton. Tony had done well in the years since they'd walked a beat together. In fact, he'd risen to the rank of Assistant Chief Constable – one of only a handful in the whole of Greater Manchester Police. He'd always said he'd do her a favour if he ever could: now she'd cashed in that promise and got her only son a huge step up the career—

A voice further down the bus had become so loud it broke Janet's chain of thought.

'I said that to her. 'Course I did, Linds! I said to her you're bang out of order doing that and she said it was first come, first served, but she's full of shit, as we both know, so I said you got to it before Steve even put it up and you know I wanted the extra shift on that Saturday, the sneaky fucking bitch.'

Janet could have rubbed her hands together. The hours she spent going round and round bus routes had a soporific effect: conversations like this were a bloody godsend. Her wheelchair was up at the front of the bus, facing sideways towards the driver. Trying to appear casual, she took a glance at the rows of seats to her right. The bus only had a smattering of passengers. The woman was three rows back, now nodding vigorously. Pointy face, twisted in a grimace, maroon-coloured hair cut in a severe bob. With the fingers of her free hand, she was attempting to balance a packet of twenty Lambert and Butlers on the railing

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of the seat in front. Janet could just see the red of a lighter poking out from the woman's curled palm. She'd be lighting up the instant she got off.

The seat across the aisle was taken by a good-looking man in his mid-forties. He had on a dark green bomber jacket that was spattered with dry paint. From the frown on his face, he was unable to ignore the woman, too.

'Yes, yes, yes, and that. Yes, I know she did. I told you, Linds, she's a sneaky fucking bitch. What can I do? Steve? Soft as shit. Gives him the pout and that's it, she gets away with it every bastard time. Tomorrow? Staying in bed for most of it. Danny's not back till next week. Somewhere up near Newcastle. Yeah, house to myself. Bliss. Then I'm back in on Saturday, but only until lunch. Yeah, Linds, I know it's shit, but what—'

'Hey.'

A male voice. Word too loud to be speaking on the phone.

Janet adjusted the bulky folder of survey forms balanced across her lap and took another look. This could get interesting. The good-looking guy was leaning across the aisle towards shrew-face. Now he'd moved, Janet could tell that, beneath the jacket's padding, the guy was heavily muscled.

'Turn it down, will you? I can hear every word of this and it's making my head ache.'

The woman lowered the phone from her face to give him an open-mouthed stare. 'You what?'

'You talking to Linds. I really don't want to know.'

'You hearing this, Linds? Some bloke's just had a pop at me. Unbelievable.'

He shook his head. 'I'm not having a pop. I'm just asking you

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to keep it down. The whole bus is having to listen. You're swearing like they gave out badges for it at school.'

Janet looked away so no one could see her smile. The man had a faint accent. German or similar.

'You've got a problem with me talking to my friend? How about you take your problem and fucking do one? There's plenty of other buses behind this one. If you don't like what you hear, get one of them.'

The man crossed his arms, sat back and slowly shook his head. 'You should really watch your mouth. Anyone told you that?'

'Linds, it's my stop, I'll call you back.' She stuffed the phone in her pocket and started to stand. Five feet two and stick thin. 'You fucking threatening me?'

'I didn't threaten you.'

'Yes, you fucking did.' The bus was beginning to slow as she started for the exit doors midway down the aisle. A man – late fifties, greying hair – was also getting off. Now he found himself trapped behind the woman as she turned back to the bloke in the bomber jacket. 'You should close them flappy ears of yours and button that lip. Listening in on people.'

The seated man's ears flushed red. Janet noticed they did stick out quite badly. 'No ch-ch—' he fought for his words. 'N-n-no choice, the tongue on you.'

As the bus pulled to a stop, the woman's face shone with playground glee. 'No ch-ch-ch, no ch-ch-ch. Learn to sp-sp-speak before you start on someone, dickhead!' The doors opened and she stepped off the bus. She was immediately at the window, her middle finger pressed against the glass, eyes drilling the man.

He stared straight ahead, face now poppy-red.

THREE

‘First up everyone, we’ll be spreading the workload a bit with some new members to the team. We have Detective Constable Mark Wheeler, who many of you will no doubt remember from his recent rotation here. A pleasure to have you back, Mark.’

He bowed his head while attempting a modest grin.

‘And Detective Constable Sean Blake, who’s joining us from across the river in Salford. That right, Sean?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, my congratulations for having survived that. Better class of criminal in Manchester proper, we like to think.’

A few people chuckled and Sean managed a smile.

‘Next, we have two CSWs to join Maggie’s team. Helen Johnson and Katie May. Have I got that right?’

Sean looked to the side of the room. Both women were nodding back. Sean noticed that Katie was blushing. Their eyes touched and he gave her an encouraging nod.

‘Good. Welcome all. Now, to business.’ The officer half turned to the noticeboard. ‘I called this briefing a bit later because we were waiting for approval on the warrant for Pamela Flood’s sometime partner, Ian Cahill.’

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He tapped the mug shot of a nasty-looking bloke that had been pinned alongside the image of the murdered woman.

‘We now have that. Word came in that Cahill’s been using a property in Middleton. He’s there right now, tucked up in a nice warm bed. We have a car outside his house. As you’re aware, Cahill is already well-known to us. Previous convictions include ones for assault, so a Tactical Aid Unit will be going in to make the actual arrest. We’ll have a presence there as back up and to go straight in and search the property once Cahill’s been carted off.’

He consulted a clipboard on the table beside him.

‘Detectives Fuller, Morris and Moor, it’s your lucky day.’ He paused as a thought occurred, then his eyes cut to Mark Wheeler and Sean Blake. ‘You two? Are you up to date with your officer safety training?’

Sean nodded, as did Mark.

‘Good. Nothing like a live op for bonding a team: you’re coming, too. Stab-proof vests for everyone at the scene. DS Fuller? We’ll need the evidence collecting kit.’

He lifted an arm and rotated a wrist to expose his watch.

‘The TAU boys have a rendezvous at the end of Cahill’s road in twenty, so we need to get going. Two cars, myself and DS Fuller driving. The rest of you? Keep to your allocated actions and I’ll see you back here soon.’

‘Sir?’

Sean glanced across to see that a stoutly built female in a brown skirt and white blouse had asked the question.

‘Yes, DS Dragomir?’

‘Has anything to connect Cahill to Francesca Pinto yet come to light?’

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Sean let his gaze linger on the woman for a second longer. Her light brown hair was cut in a short, sensible style and the frames of her glasses seemed too thick. The accent, he guessed, was Eastern European. Bulgaria, Slovenia or something similar.

The leading officer looked briefly at Pinto's photo, as if the murder victim was able to hear his answer. 'Woodhill's – the firm of solicitors where Francesca worked – are still checking their records to pinpoint when and where she and Cahill crossed paths. It won't take long to dig the information out.'

SEAN FOUND HIMSELF IN the back of a dark green Volvo being driven at an uncomfortably fast pace by DS Fuller. The flesh at the base of his skull bulged out above his thick neck. Directly in front of them was an identical vehicle that contained Detective Chief Inspector Ransford and Detective Constables Morris and Moor.

Sean kept glancing down at his hands, disappointed how they were slightly sweaty. He couldn't quite believe they were on their way to arresting the prime suspect in a double murder case. It was exciting – but it also felt surreal.

He glanced up to see Fuller's beady eyes on him in the rear-view mirror. 'All right back there?'

Sean gave a silent nod, before deciding a proper reply was more appropriate. 'Yeah, fine thanks.'

'Good stuff. You were looking a bit queasy for a second. You don't get carsick, do you?'

'No. Just . . .'

'Feeling like you've been swept up in a whirlwind?'

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‘Yes.’

Fuller nodded. ‘It’s not always like this, believe me. But we don’t believe in comfort zones in the SCU. Or passengers. Especially not passengers. Keep on your toes, always show willing, and you’ll fit right in.’ His head turned towards the front seat where Mark Wheeler sat. ‘So, Marko, fraud investigations not your cup of tea?’

Mark lifted his chin and directed a relaxed smile towards the vehicle’s ceiling. He was, Sean thought, like a star pupil. Football captain, head of year and an A-grade student, all rolled into one. Someone being groomed for the top.

‘Too much sitting at a desk, staring at numbers. I was nearly nodding off.’

Fuller grinned. ‘Yeah, bollocks to that. Bringing in the bad guys: nothing beats it.’

They hit a knot of traffic that slowed them to crawling pace. Sean let his gaze trail along the pavement beyond his window. A solitary schoolboy was cramming a cereal bar into his mouth, his book bag almost sliding off the hunched shoulder of a too-big blazer. *I remember that*, Sean thought. During his school years, there often wasn’t enough milk in the fridge for them both. Since Janet was housebound during most of that time, he’d just grab something from the corner shop and stuff it on his way to school.

Next, he saw a man in his early thirties looking stressed. In one hand was a bunch of keys he was managing to jangle loudly with every rushed step. He made a woman going in the opposite direction pause by positioning himself in her path. Words were rapidly spoken. The woman shook her head apologetically,

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having to step round him. He raised a hand in passive protest then continued on his way.

Their car moved forward and Sean twisted in his seat, certain he'd seen the bloke somewhere before. They reached a set of lights and rolled to a stop. Sean realized, in a few more seconds, the man would catch them up. He half lowered his window to listen.

'Excuse me, love. Love? Listen, I'm really sorry, but I just came out of a job interview and my car's been towed! I'm fifty pence short for the bus fare out to the compound. That's all.'

The Northern Irish accent put a drawl on his little speech, as if – given a choice – his words would be happier to stay in his mouth. Sean took another look: Daniel Thompson. The straggly hair might have been grown out, but no doubt it was him. *It must have been*, Sean thought, *ten months since I arrested him for breaking into an amusement arcade*. The poor bloke had crowbarred an entire row of fruit machines open, all of which had been emptied earlier that afternoon. Crime was never going to make him rich, that was for sure.

'Ah, cheers, love. You're a saviour, seriously.'

Thompson waited a couple of seconds then began to manoeuvre himself into the path of someone new.

'Really sorry, pal. I just came out of a job interview to find my car's been towed. Thing is, I need—'

'Thompson!'

His head whipped round.

Sean had already wound the window fully down. Using two fingers, he drew a bead from his eyes across to the other man. *I'm watching you.*

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Thompson blinked a couple of time before realization dawned. ‘Constable Bl—’ He swiftly regained his composure. ‘Day off, is it. No uniform?’

Sean brought him closer by crooking a finger. ‘Bought yourself a car and learned to drive since you got out?’

Thompson smiled sheepishly. ‘You’re a sharp one, Constable Blake. It’s my cousin’s. I only borrowed it, you see.’

‘That right? So what’s the make?’

‘It’s a you know – one of them Japanese ones . . . Toyota?’

Sean’s eyes were on the set of keys. ‘Really? Because I don’t see a fob for a Toyota in your—’

‘Hey!’ Fuller barked. He was peering between the two front seats, hostile stare on Thompson.

The young man had to bend down to make eye contact. ‘All right, over there?’

‘Fuck off.’

The friendly twinkle vanished from Thompson’s eyes and he immediately stepped back, a wheedling note lifting his voice. ‘No need to get all—’

Fuller accelerated through the green lights, now using the rear-view mirror to look at Sean. ‘Who was that?’

‘I crossed paths with him a bit when I was working in the Pendleton nick.’

‘Yeah?’ Fuller didn’t sound interested. ‘Forget lowlifes like him, DC Blake. They’re not your shout anymore.’

Sean leaned forward. ‘Even if he’s right in front of me, ripping folks off?’

Fuller sighed. ‘Small fry. Not your concern.’ He floated a faint smile in Mark Wheeler’s direction.

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Sean was just able to see his fellow detective constable's eyebrows lift in tacit agreement. *Cheers for that buddy*, thought Sean, sitting back.

'So,' Mark announced, 'how come this guy is our man?'

'Cahill?' Fuller shoved his bottom lip out. 'Pamela Flood had taken out a restraining order on him. CCTV from a camera on the house a few doors down from hers shows Cahill making his way along the street at three in the morning. One of those infrared jobs; got him plain as day.'

'When was this?'

'Hours before she was killed. He shouldn't have been within a kilometre of her house and, when originally questioned, claimed that was the case. We now also know he called her earlier that evening.'

'You managed to pull in his phone records?'

'No. With it being a murder investigation, we obtained all of hers. He rang asking to be taken back. They ended up having a proper go at each other. By the end of the call, he's threatening to kill her.'

'Actual threat?'

"'I will slit your fucking throat.'"

'The romantic old so-and-so.'

Fuller laughed.

THE REAR OF CAHILL'S PROPERTY ended at a five-foot-high wooden fence. Fuller peered over it then sank back down out of sight. 'All the curtains upstairs are drawn. Bloke's about to get the mother of all wake-up calls.' He tried the back gate and

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found it wasn't locked. 'Result. We'll get closer. If he does exit the property, we can bring him down before he takes a step.'

Before leaving the station, they'd all changed into casual clothes and trainers. Sean's stab-proof vest was digging into his armpits. He sank to his haunches and tugged at its lower edge. Beside him, Mark Wheeler moved an extendable baton from hand to hand. *Finally*, Sean thought, *a trace of nerves. Just a trace, but enough to prove he's human.*

DS Fuller checked his watch. 'Right, thirty-six seconds and the front goes in. We'll hear a load of shouting as the TAU pile up the stairs. Let's get in position.'

As he slipped through the half-open gate, the first thing Sean noticed was a children's trampoline. Way too big for the garden, it was practically touching the back of the modest property. In the other corner was a small conservatory, double doors that, when open, would give access to a cramped patio. Empty beer bottles and cans floated in the tray of a rusty barbecue.

Moving quickly, they approached the house and pressed themselves against the rear wall, out of sight of anyone peering from a first-floor window. DS Fuller gave a thumbs up, then mouthed he was checking the side of the property for any door there. He skirted carefully round the trampoline and disappeared from sight.

Sean frowned. What was a trampoline doing in the garden? In the briefing at the end of the road, he was sure it had been stated Cahill lived alone. There were no kids in—

A massive bang sent a tremor through the bricks behind him. Another. The TAU had started swinging their Enforcer against the front door. *Must have extra locks on it*, thought Sean, looking

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up to see a bedroom window had swung open. A pair of bare feet then lower legs, calf muscles stained by tattoos, appeared.

Another bang, this one accompanied by the sound of splintering wood.

Above him he could now see muscular thighs, then black boxer shorts with the words Calvin Klein repeating round the waistband. From inside the house, a chorus of shouts.

Police! Do not move! Stay still! Police!

The muffled thud of boots going up the stairs. Sean looked down; the trampoline was directly beneath the window. Cahill's legs were now fully out. His lower back appeared as he started sliding himself across the windowsill.

'He's going to jump down!' Sean yelled, trying to drag the trampoline away from the house. But the metal frame's lower edge came up against the patio. The trampoline abruptly halted and Sean fell back into a sitting position. Next to him, Mark Wheeler was fumbling with the release mechanism of his baton.

Now hanging by just the fingertips of one hand, Cahill twisted and dropped, knees flexing as he made contact with the elasticated surface. The next thing he was launched forward, directly at Mark. The two men went down, arms and legs intertwined. Cahill's right elbow came back and he started peppering Mark's neck with pathetic little rabbit punches.

Sean scrambled on to all fours, ready to dive at Cahill. Each time the man's elbow came back, an arc of blood followed it. Was there a weapon in Cahill's fist?

Mark's arms fell away, allowing Cahill to raise himself to his knees. His head swivelled. Flecks of red covered his face and neck and the whites of his eyes seemed too bright. Time seemed

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to slow down as Sean stared back. From Mark's mouth came the sound of a bath draining dry.

A voice, from the open window above. 'Get him!'

Cahill's eyes lifted and a stubby screwdriver with a sharpened point fell from his grip.

'Get him! Move!'

As Cahill started sprinting towards the open gate, Sean jumped to his feet. He took a step forward but the sight of Mark Wheeler stopped him. The skin of his colleague's face was like greaseproof paper. His eyes had rolled up into his head and the spurts of blood coming from the side of his neck were rapidly losing strength.

A compress. He needed a compress. Something to cover all the wounds at once. He began tugging the Velcro straps at the waist of his stab-proof vest. Beneath it he was wearing a cotton sweatshirt. That would have to do.

He felt himself being shoved aside as DS Fuller's voice rang out. 'Paramedics, paramedics, we need paramedics!'

FOUR

Just before nine thirty in the morning: the perfect time to pay someone a visit. Those with jobs were confined to their workplaces, children were shut away in school, retired folk had yet to venture out. The streets were quiet and, more importantly, there was room to park.

He swung his white Peugeot van into a space further down the road from flat 54a. On the passenger seat beside him was a package, complete with label, which he'd prepared the night before. Once he knew her address, finding her name on the internet had taken no time at all.

After checking the pavement was free of people, he pulled the baseball cap low on his head, picked up the package and his console from the passenger seat and climbed out of the van.

Yesterday, when he'd followed the woman home from the bus, he'd been able to get a good look at where she lived. A ground-floor flat of a semi-detached house. A huge caravan occupied every inch of one neighbour's drive. The other was screened off by a laurel hedge at least eight foot high. The chances of being observed were minimal.

He walked with purpose; a man with a schedule to keep. Head down, he marched up to the front door and pressed the

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bell. Waiting for an answer, he contemplated her behaviour the previous day on the bus.

Her screeching voice and the foul language she'd flung around. No better than an ape soiling its cage. He felt his grip tightening on the package and had to relax his fingers before he damaged it. *Come on! Drag your lazy carcass out of bed.* He pressed the bell again. Women who thought they could talk to men like that. How he loathed them. He thought about the crude, raucous females who'd started to attend his classes at the academy.

They weren't interested in learning how to be electricians. To them, his classes were just an opportunity for idle chat, flirting and playing on their phones. The moment his hand struck the feisty little blonde's face was still crystal clear in his mind. Her look of utter shock, a sweet moment of silence – then chaos.

'Oh my God!'

'No way!'

'You cannot do that!'

'Did he just hit Shelley?'

'Get her away from her, man!'

'You are bang out of order!'

'Shelley, are you OK?'

'A slap? You are in deep shit.'

'He actually hit her?'

'I said get away from her!'

'I can't believe this!'

'Come on, Shelley, we're getting out of here.'

The clatter of plastic wheels approached along the pavement behind him. He kept his back to the street, bowed his head and remained very still. The adoring murmurs of a mum as she passed

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the end of the drive, a buggy pushed before her. If she had seen him on the front step, all she'd have clocked was a dark blue uniform.

He pressed the bell a third time and kept his finger on it.

A shadow shifted beyond the frosted glass. A pinkish blur materialized from the gloom and he heard the shuffle of her feet. 'Yes, all right! Stop the fucking ringing!'

He lowered his finger and waited.

Her voice, ragged and irritated, came through the door. 'Who is it?'

'Signed-for package. Julie Roe?'

The lock rattled and the door swung open. She was in a hideous dressing gown the colour of bubble-gum, bare feet and ankles in view. Her eyes were puffy and that absurd maroon hair stuck out at one side. If she remembered him from the bus, it certainly didn't show on her face.

One hand was pinching the sides of her dressing gown tight at the base of her throat. Her other hand held a mobile phone. Even as she spoke, she couldn't help checking its screen. 'A package?'

Christ, he thought. Conscious for less than a minute and already glued to the bloody thing.

'That's correct. It's signed-for. If I could just get a signature from you, here?'

She wrenched her eyes from her phone, blinked a couple of times and then coughed. He tasted her stale breath in his mouth. 'Who's it from?'

'No idea. I just require a signature on the console.'

'Had to come on my day off,' she murmured. 'Fucking typical.' She held a hand out.

'Thank you.' He slid the stylus from its clip.

FIVE

The handset gave his mum's voice a plastic buzz. He sighed, eyes fixed on the ceiling above his bed. He'd been awake for hours.

'Sean?'

He let his head fall to the side. The little walkie-talkie on the bedside table made it easy for her to get his attention, wherever either of them was in the house. At times like these, he wished he'd never had the idea of getting them. He wished he was asleep. He wished he could turn over and pretend the previous day had never happened. Why did he even try and become a detective so early in his career? But he knew the answer to that.

'Sean?'

He'd been so close to getting his stab-proof vest off.

'Sean, it's after nine o'clock. You can't still be—'

'Morning, Mum.' He was up on one elbow, handset held before his face.

'Good morning to you. There's a cup of tea for you down here, and I'm doing some eggs.'

'I'll be there in a minute.'

He dropped the handset on the duvet and leaned his head back. The images refused to fade: blood bubbling from Mark

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Wheeler's parted lips. Miniature geysers spurting from his neck. Four or five. The wet hiss each eruption had made. When DS Fuller had looked up to shout, Sean saw that Mark's blood had hit him in the face. A dribble on his chin had made Fuller look like he'd been feeding on the stricken officer.

THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE STATION had been oddly silent, even though everyone in the car had been speaking. Then he'd been led up the stairs to a small meeting room. Ransford spoke to him briefly before making way for two other men. Forms were laid out in front of him. A drink appeared. Hot chocolate, like he was a child. Eventually, Ransford came back.

He was carrying two written statements. One from the TAU officer who'd shouted down from the bedroom window and one from DS Fuller. The TAU officer had stated that, when he looked into the back garden, Sean had been partly under the trampoline. It appeared he was trying to avoid tackling Cahill, who had leaped down from the first-floor window.

'No,' Sean replied. 'That's not right. I was trying to drag it out into the garden. I saw Cahill coming out of the first-floor window and was trying to cut off his escape route.'

'And when he attacked DC Wheeler, you failed to act because . . .?'

'Failed to act? It happened so fast. Cahill let go of the window ledge. From my position on the grass, I saw the underside of the trampoline stretch down. Next thing—'

'You were beneath the trampoline?'

'Partly. I fell back as I was trying to pull it away from the wall.'

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Ransford didn't look impressed. 'Carry on.'

'Next thing, they're both beside me on the grass. I thought it was his fist connecting with Mark's neck area. It was only when I saw blood—'

'The TAU officer stated that, even after Cahill dropped the implement, he had to instruct you to prevent his escape.'

'I . . . well . . . I was about to.'

'But only after he'd shouted at you?'

'I'm not sure.' Sean could hear his voice starting to waver. 'I mean, I was getting to my feet, about to give chase.'

'But then you stopped.'

'When I saw the extent of Mark's injuries, yes.'

Ransford shuffled the sheets of paper in his hand. 'DS Fuller states that, when he entered the back garden from the side area of the property, there was no sign of Cahill and you were, I quote, "frozen". Looking down at Wheeler – nothing more.'

'No, that's not right, either. I knew the flow of blood had to be stemmed. But there were multiple puncture wounds, all close together. Pressing down on one would only widen the adjacent ones. That's exactly what happened when DS Fuller applied his hands to the wounds. I was attempting to remove my stab-proof vest so I could create a compress with the sweatshirt I had on underneath. At that point, a TAU officer arrived with a first-aid kit.'

'This was when DC Wheeler entered cardiac arrest?'

Sean nodded.

Ransford was silent for a few seconds. 'I see.'

Sean watched him as he reread what was on the sheets of paper in his hand. 'I think we need to hear from Mark Wheeler.'

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He's the only person who can clear this up properly, and that's obviously not . . . listen, this hasn't been easy for anyone. I think it's best you head home, have some time to get your head straight. I'll contact you tomorrow.'

The walk to his desk felt like he was wading through treacle. Everyone was engrossed in their tasks: on phones, studying screens, consulting with colleagues. Eyes flicked to him for a second, then moved away.

Only the woman – Dragmar? – had come across. She'd placed a hand on his shoulder, asked how he was. As he'd made his way to the main doors, he noticed Fuller was at his desk. The man kept his eyes averted. So did DCs Morris and Moor.

The walkie-talkie clicked. 'Sean?'

He retrieved the handset. 'Coming.'

'Have you got the radio on up there?'

'No.'

'There's just been an announcement about Mark Wheeler. He's not dead. Critical, but he's alive.'

Sean sat up properly. 'He is?'

'They just said so. On BBC Radio Manchester.'

'He's alive? They said that?'

'Yes!'

Sean bowed his head in thanks.

SIX

She lay on the floor like a shop dummy, arms and legs still vibrating from the charge. Funny how they did that, he thought, closing the front door behind him.

Knowing her muscles would cease to spasm in another few seconds, he hooded her then drew the string tight about her throat. He preferred an opaque bag: see-through ones allowed eye contact, which wasn't pleasant.

A moment of welcome silence, as if she was thinking. Then the thin polythene began to crater across her mouth as she tried to drag in air. The crinkly noise sped up and he held her arms tight at her sides. Next, the legs started to thrash, heels hammering against the carpet.

Not long now.

He took the opportunity for a look around. The lounge was immediately to his right. Big telly and fat sofa. No sign of any books, as expected. A framed photo on the wall at the base of the stairs. Her and a female friend sipping from cocktails in a neon-lit bar. A closed door to his left with a cheap plastic plaque.

Salle de Bains.

He didn't think she'd have spoken French. Probably just a memento from a holiday. Maybe the Danny she'd mentioned on

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the bus had treated her to a city break. An EasyJet flight to Paris, or Nice, or maybe that place over on the east coast. The one popular with lots of British.

The thump of her feet was growing less insistent.

Nantes, that was it. Convenient for getting to the coast. There was an island you could get a ferry to. Pleasant place, though a bit crowded. Very nice beaches.

She became still, at last.

As he'd walked up to her front door, he'd noticed the front room curtains were drawn. So he rose to his feet and, humming to himself, wandered in. On the table before the telly was an empty bottle of wine and four – no, five – cans of vodka and cranberry. Two were lying on their sides. An ashtray crowded with butts.

As he'd thought, not a single book in the place. All the shelving unit in the corner contained were DVDs. *Friends*. *League of Gentlemen*. *Twilight*. *Pretty Woman*. *Mean Girls*. All the signs of a slovenly lifestyle.

The armchair was ideal, though. High backed and with wide armrests. Getting her in a good position would be easy.

He went back into the hallway, loosened the string and slid the bag off her head. *Not got much to say now, have you?* Miniscule blossoms of blood, fragile as snowflakes, dotted her eyeballs. Sadly, they'd soon lose definition to become ugly smears.

He reached into the pocket of the dressing gown to remove her phone. It was long and narrow. Even though her mouth could accommodate it quite comfortably, he'd already made the decision about taking their tongues.

The sight of them, in their jars on the shelf in his garage,

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was something he liked to . . . he searched for the appropriate word. Savour? He almost smiled. Very droll. His first attempt had been clumsy. For a start, he'd only realized it would be necessary to cut it out after he'd propped her in the chair. He'd not come equipped with a knife, so had ended up searching through her kitchen and she didn't have one with a serrated edge.

As with everything in life, he said to himself, you could improve. That was something he always told his students. He removed the side of the console and laid the panel on the floor. Taped to its inner surface was a wooden-handled fold-out knife. He liked its design, especially the small, crescent-shaped groove on one side of the blade. He inserted the nail of his thumb into it and pulled the six-inch length of metal clear. A row of tiny teeth ran along its lower edge.