1

Glasgow.

Now, or thereabouts.

The boy turned up with no work boots, just a pair of old trainers, and a holdall slung across his back, almost as big as he was. Jozef looked at him, doubtful, on the doorstep; at his red hair and freckles, and the way he squinted in the summer light, the June sun already up above the rooftops.

'You got me out of bed.'

The church clock opposite said ten past six, so he must be just off the London bus; no hanging about, he looked like he'd come straight down to the South Side on foot. The boy gave a nod, a shrug:

'Romek tellt me tae come straight here. He said you'd pay me.'

And Jozef had agreed to do that, it was true. So he stood to one side to let him in.

—

Romek had told him the boy was nineteen, but he didn't look it: too slight across the shoulders. His red head was cut close, and the back of his skinny neck too pale, blue-pale above his T-shirt. Jozef watched him as he showed him around the big house: the stripped-bare rooms, and up and down the wide stairs. All the work still to be completed. The boy walked ahead of him through the empty top floor that commanded the best views, over the park in full leaf, and all the other sandstone villas. This place could fetch a premium price, so Jozef said:

'The developer, he wants hardwood on the floors, built-in wardrobes. Quality finish.'

The boy narrowed his eyes at that, running a critical palm across the plasterwork, and Jozef sighed:

'I know, I know. Not good enough. But the one who did those walls, he's gone now.'

'Aye.'

The boy gave a smile, as though he'd already been told, and Jozef didn't much like to see that. Just how much had Romek been saying?

Jozef was struggling up here, and he didn't want that spread wide; he couldn't have it getting back to Poland and his wife. He needed this job to work out so he could talk Ewa round, into trying again. But things kept getting away from him somehow, and far too easily: his workers falling out, and failing to show after payday, the ones he'd found in Glasgow anyway. It was as though they'd sniffed him out: not site-boss material, too soft, not nearly bottom line enough, and Jozef cursed that it showed. But Romek was a proper site-boss, of the Polish old school – big-hearted, but hard too, when it was needed – and he'd promised him a good worker. Romek had said this boy was one of the best he'd found in London, plus

he was from round here, so he could help Jozef with the locals, the way they spoke.

Back downstairs, they stood together in the half-built kitchen, the boy at the door, like he was ready to get lost again, any moment. Still uneasy, Jozef put the kettle on for tea, but he had no food to offer. He'd been living on the ground floor while he did up the rest of the building; he saved on rent, the developer on security, and it meant Jozef was putting aside a good sum each month. Come the end of the summer, he'd go back to Gdańsk and show Ewa: how much he'd saved, and that he could still make things work for them. In the meantime, it was the others who brought in the food, all his workers, the ones he'd found from home. Some of them had their families here now, and their wives packed extra for Jozef; sympathy meals, but he was grateful. He told the boy:

'We have some breakfast when we start. We start eight o'clock.'

The boy gave that same nod-shrug again, his eyes not on Jozef but the Glasgow morning, blue beyond the garden door. The long back gardens sloped on down the hill, and after that came the rooftops of the South Side tenements, with the sun already high above the slates and chimney pots. The summers here were bright but short, and not nearly warm enough, and Jozef couldn't tell what the boy was thinking: if he liked what he was seeing, if he was ready to start on this job.

His clothes had been worked in, even if they weren't work clothes: his T-shirt thin with wearing, jeans trodden down at the hems. The boy had a patch on his knee, sewn on badly, with a hand pictured on it: a red one, held up, palm forward, *No Surrender* stitched underneath. Jozef hadn't been here long, but he suspected that was from a football club. Most of his workers

followed one club or another, but Jozef didn't. He'd grown up in a houseful of women and never grew to like the game, or pay it much attention, he only knew that one Glasgow team wore blue, the other stripes, green and white, and the fans did so much fighting. It was a split in the city that went deeper than sport, and he didn't pretend to understand it, but it made Jozef wary; he'd warned his men not to take sides, or go drinking on game nights. The pubs here put signs on their doors, no football colours in the bar, and Jozef didn't want work days lost to a pub brawl, so he looked again at the boy's patch, the raised palm an angry red, and he wondered which side this hand belonged to. But then he told himself: *as long as the boy gets on with the others*. And at least he'd be the only Scot among them.

They had three floors, and a bit less than four weeks to finish them. Almost mid-summer now, they had till the first July weekend to get out, so Jozef was pressed for time. Romek had told him the boy was just what he needed: an extra pair of hands, without the extra paperwork, no National Insurance Number, no questions asked. Jozef had expected someone bigger, though. And work boots too.

'You can't wear these ones.'

He nodded to the boy's trainers, spattered with gobs of plaster. From the look of the frayed laces, he must have been wearing them on the job for ages. The boy stepped forward, reaching for the mug he'd filled, and the sugar bag too, and then he pointed down at his holdall with the teaspoon between stirs.

'I've a pair ae Romek's. Wan ae his boys.'

That made Jozef laugh. It was just like Romek to give his son's boots to a stranger's child. This boy must be someone's, so Jozef asked:

'Who will you stay with?'

And then the boy looked at him, sharp:

'You. Here.'

He pointed to the ceiling, the rooms up there:

'Romek tellt me that was part ae the deal.'

He blinked at Jozef, looking straight at him now, but his eyes were guarded:

'I've a sleeping bag an that. Nae bother. I can take care ae mysel.'

The boy said it like he'd been doing that for a long time. It was the most he'd said since he arrived, so Jozef watched him, his young face, and the way he drank his tea, his eyes turning away again, back out to the skyline. Romek had said nothing about him staying in the house, or that there might be trouble with his family. But then the church clock struck the quarter, and the boy put down his mug:

'May as well make a start, aye?'

If he was willing to start early, Jozef wasn't going to argue. He shrugged his assent: there was no shortage of empty rooms upstairs, and as long as this boy got the work done, family didn't have to come into it.

2

Tyrone.

Early 1990s.

Graham was eighteen and rubbish at talking to females. Even some he'd known years, like his brothers' wives. He looked like a grown man, only he wasn't yet; he was just all shoulders and neck, wide forehead, and no talk. Everyone in the flute band was aware of this, so when they were out in the Ulster wilds, it was Graham they dispatched to get the lunch, because it was a girl he'd have to speak to on the burger van: a fine one.

He'd been up since dawn, drumming and drinking all morning. It was his first time away from home, his first Orange Walk outside of Glasgow, but nothing like the other Walks he'd been on. Same skirling flutes, dark suits, bright sashes, and crown and Bible banners, but no tarmac and traffic, no high flats and crowds of torn-faced shoppers. Tyrone was all wet fields and

hedgerows, as far as his eye could see, and the echo of the Lambegs thudding back at them from the low hills. There were masses of folk out too: more every village they passed through, and the field they stopped in at the halfway mark was heaving. Grannies in deckchairs with tea in flasks, mobs of young kids in Rangers-blue T-shirts; candyfloss, and sausage suppers, smell of wet grass and frying onions.

The lodges were on the far side; all the dour faces, making their speeches. Protestant values in chapter and verse. The band stuck with the crowd, though, and the colour: more chance of a drink there. Graham hadn't paid for a pint since he got here. There were always more folk buying, especially if he told them his Grandad was from Ireland: his Mum's Dad. And that Papa Robert was in the Orange. Graham's tongue loose with lager, he'd been telling folk ever since the ferry, but his tongue was pulled tight again by the sight of Lindsey.

Dark red hair. Wee skirt and trainers, bare arms. All those freckles. She drew all eyes in the queue, including Graham's. Lindsey was taking the money, getting the cans of juice out of the fridge, and adding up what was owed in her head. Half the band had set their sights on her for after, even if none of them rated their chances, and Graham could see why, when she turned her grey eyes on him:

'What'll it be then?'

She knew he'd been staring. So Graham had to look past her to get the words out. He was ordering for most of the band, or that's what it felt like. And then a couple of the flutes kept changing their minds, calling across from the grass where they'd parked themselves with the drums; chopping and changing between burgers and bacon rolls. They were doing it to wind him up, Graham knew that fine well, so he did his best not to

let it show, except the order got too hard to follow, and then Lindsey gave up on the sums and got the calculator out of the cash box.

The queue behind Graham was grumbling by that stage, but Lindsey just told them all to watch their manners. He looked up at her then, and saw how her eyes were sharp and smiling, her back straight, like she could take on all comers. She got Graham to go through the order again, roll by roll, burger by burger. And she wasn't teasing him either; she knew he was shy, but that was all right.

Graham watched her fingers on the calculator buttons, and her narrow lips, repeating what he told her; the pink tip of her tongue, and all her freckles. His eyes found them on her face and hands first, then down her neck as well, and up her arms. They were all wearing the same T-shirts on the van: oversized, with what looked like a lodge number and today's date printed across the top of the chest. They all had aprons, so the rest of the shirt was covered, but Lindsey was wearing hers back to front, and knotted at the side, so when she turned round to get Graham's change, he could see the Red Hand of Ulster printed on the cloth. And how long her hair was too: a long, loose plait. It stopped at Lindsey's hips, where Graham found more freckles to stare at, on a bare inch of lovely skin showing just above the waistband of her skirt.

After all that, she didn't have enough coins left in the float.

'I'll bring the change over later.'

Lindsey told Graham she'd come and find him, before the lodges set off up the road again. She looked right at him too, making her promise:

'Won't forget you, honest.'

—

Graham watched her while he was eating, from the safer distance of the damp grass, sitting with the rest of the band. She was the same with everyone she served – joking, familiar – and he was gutted, thinking he'd just imagined it. He'd been so sure of it, up at the van: that she fancied him. He tried to work out how old she was: could be fourteen, could be eighteen, no telling. Graham hoped she wasn't older than him.

Lindsey did come over when they were making ready to go, and she gave Graham the coins she owed. He had his drum back on already, and his gloves, so he pulled those off to take the money. He felt her fingers touch his palm, just for a second, and then she stayed next to him while the bands and lodges assembled. Graham couldn't look at her then. But he was certain again.

He waited for her after the Walk, in the back room of the only pub. Graham sat there a good couple of hours, sure that she'd come, certain he'd never have the nerve to go and look for her if she didn't; and then he saw her. Walking through the bar, and looking for him, he knew she was, because when she saw him she made a bee-line through the crush. She had the same T-shirt on, still knotted, but no apron, so now Graham could see the skin on her belly, and it was all he could do to stop himself putting his hands there when she got up close.

One drink later they were out the back and walking, past where the barrels were stacked and on, with the sun going down behind their shoulders. It was quiet out there after the pub doors fell shut; just the two of them on the empty track, and neither of them talking. Only the sound of the wind in the wheat, and the weeds growing tall beside the farm gate. They walked the

length of a tumbledown wall until it got low enough to climb, and behind that was a hidden spot with just enough grass for Lindsey to lie down.

Graham shouted out when he pushed himself inside her. He didn't mean to, but it didn't matter; she didn't laugh or anything. But then after, when it was over, when she stood up and pulled down her skirt, Lindsey looked at him, and then he saw it hadn't been that way, not for her.

Graham was still on his knees, and he busied himself with his trousers. Tucking in his shirt, to cover his shame: gutted again. Too much drunk, he regretted the pints he'd already sunk.

Lindsey stood a moment, watching, and then she crouched down next to him reaching for her knickers. They'd slipped off her ankles, over her trainers, and she picked them up from where they'd landed.

'Where you from then?'

She was looking at him, face level with his, and close; knickers bunched in her fist. Graham told her:

'Scotland.'

And she rolled her eyes. But friendly, he thought: like she'd been on the burger van that afternoon. Graham said:

'Fae Glasgow. I'm fae Drumchapel.'

He named the housing scheme, though she'd never have heard of it, and then Lindsey narrowed her eyes a bit:

'You in a juvenile lodge, Graham? Or a man's?'

She was smiling. She'd found out his name from someone, and now she was guessing how old he was. But she was teasing as well, and that nerve was still too raw for Graham to take courage. So he shook his head:

'I'm no.'

Bad enough he was in a band, that's what his Mum said.

There'd be no end of nagging if he joined a lodge: she'd told him their family had had troubles enough. But Graham wasn't about to go into all that, because Lindsey had her cool eyes on him, like she was weighing him up. She leaned in a bit closer:

'Me either. My Da's Orange enough for the two of us.'

Lindsey pulled at her T-shirt, tugging the lodge number up onto her shoulder to show him, then shoving it back again, out of sight.

The knot at her waist had gone slack. So she undid it, and then re-tied it, tighter; higher up, under her ribs, and she told him:

'I've never been to Glasgow. Is it good there?'

Graham shrugged, trying not to look at her skin. That strip of it on show again above her skirt.

'Aye.'

He'd never thought if Glasgow was good or not, he couldn't say. Lindsey looked at him a second or two:

'Better than here.'

She wasn't asking, but Graham shrugged again, by way of reply; not wanting to put this place down, because he'd had a fine time. Except that made Lindsey smile, so he had to look away, and then his eyes landed on the small scrunch of cloth between her fingers. Lindsey laughed:

'Bet it is.'

And then:

'I've never been anywhere.'

She stood up and pocketed her knickers.

Graham thought she was making to go, and so this was it now: it was all over. But when he looked up, she was waiting for him:

'You coming?'

—

Lindsey put two fingers through his belt loops when they got to the road. She was walking next to him, but it felt like she was pulling, like she was more than willing, and Graham got hard again, and hopeful; so hard that it was painful. And even when she led him up the front path to a house and got her keys out, even though he felt sure this must be her Mum and Dad's place, and they might be home and demand to know who he was, Graham couldn't think of anything but pushing himself inside her again.

Lindsey shut the door and there was no one there. Just the last bit of late sun falling through the window onto the carpet, same colour as her hair. The red gold girl, she stood in front of him, and he put his fingers there first, where he wanted to be, and she was wet; not just from what he'd done before, he was sure, because it was different; she was full and swollen, just like he was. She kissed him, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, and she kept her eyes open, unzipping his trousers.

3

The girl came as a shock. It took Brenda a while to adjust: a girl was the last thing she'd expected from Graham.

He was Brenda's youngest, by a few years, a big baby with a big head; *oh ho, a troop cometh*, Malky said. Graham was a happy accident, who never stopped eating, never stopped growing. He was the quietest of their four sons, but also the tallest, and the widest. Overnight he couldn't do up the buttons on his school shirts, his socks forever showing where his trousers were too short. Graham was a gentle lad, and a comfort, but a bit too backwards in coming forwards, so Brenda fretted about him some school mornings, after she'd dropped him at the gates: hard to see him sidelined at the railings till the bell went.

She and Malky used to talk about him last thing at night, in bed, lights out. Brenda said she watched all the other boys tearing about, and Graham standing there like he didn't know how. Malky said he'd learn, give him time. So she'd held her tongue when Graham joined his first band.

It wasn't that Brenda liked it, but it was just about the first thing he'd joined in with. And she knew plenty boys who'd done the same: her older sons' school pals, and even Malky, before they were married and he'd settled to driving his cab. Malky reckoned it was just a scheme hazard, part of life if your life was lived in Drumchapel. He said boys will be boys, they'll always want to belong, and he teased Brenda too: he said it was her blood coming through. Her Dad had been an Orangeman, true blue, forever nursing the wounds of his Free State youth; *aw the faimly woes, they all lead back tae Ireland.* But Malky was a sweet man, mostly, and he could tease without being hurtful, so Brenda trusted him when he told her flute bands were forever springing up and then folding, and Graham would grow out of it, same as he had.

Graham was thirteen when he started. He got himself a paper round to pay for his uniform, and Brenda didn't know that it was worth it: all he did was bash the cymbals. But the months went by with him saving, and then the Glasgow Walk rolled round, as it always did, just ahead of Ulster; first Saturday in July she sent him off with a good breakfast, if not her blessing, and then Graham came home again towards tea time with his face all shining. Wide-shouldered and even taller in his new uniform trousers. He said how folk on the scheme had cheered them, and followed them all the way into town, and how the lodge they'd played for had paid them too, like no one had told him that's how it worked. Graham saved his cut, in any case, and then he took on a second round, because he could manage two paper bags, one across each shoulder. He did that for months. Earned himself enough for a drum. Just second-hand, but he chose a good one, Malky said so: he remembered that much from his own band days.

The drum got Malky worried too, Brenda could see that,

because he went out and made enquiries. He even went along to practice, to see where this was headed, and have a quiet word to Geordie. He was the bandmaster, and an Orangeman too, but one of the decent kind. Malky told Brenda his band had been going decades, no headcases allowed: Geordie only kept folk that could hold a melody down. He didn't like a drum to be battered, the way they did in the blood-and-thunder bands, he said it should be played, and he taught Graham the difference. So for a while there, they breathed a bit easier.

Only it turned out Graham was quick to learn, and quick to get poached by other bands. It was a new lot he went to Tyrone with: none of them much over twenty, not one of them with an ounce of sense. The idiot bandmaster reckoned the Glasgow Walk was just a warm-up to get the marching season started. The real deal was over in Ireland on the Twelfth, so he'd talked some country lodge into hiring them, and it was a worry from the outset, the whole enterprise.

Brenda looked the town up in the atlas that used to be her father's. It was just a thumbprint's distance from Portadown, where they didn't just remember the Battle of the Boyne each July, they fought it against their neighbours all year round. She told Malky it was too much like the place her Dad was born in; she'd grown up hearing all Papa Robert's stories, of the Irish Civil War and what came after, when the Free State turned out to be anything but, and the family fled across the water. Plus she'd had two sons in the army, and endured their Ulster tours of duty, so there were just some place names that set Brenda on edge. The folk around those parts were unyielding. Not just the Catholics, with their residents' groups, stirring the bloody soup, but her own kind too: staunch. No thought of surrender allowed there. They all had their reasons, turned rigid over centuries of

grievance, but Brenda said if no one bent, then someone was bound to break, and she didn't want it to be their boy.

She'd gone to meet Graham off the coach, when it drew up outside the snooker club, hours late, and it was bucketing too. He was a sight: looked like he'd spent the three days drinking himself red-eyed. Relief made Brenda run off at the mouth, and she gave the older boys in the band a piece of her mind, until they put her straight:

'A braw lassie wae red hair doon tae her bum, missus. Nothin tae dae wae us.'

It took days to get any sense out of Graham. He sat there with his dinner plates untouched, his eyes all small and sore in his big face. The phone kept going, every few hours, call box calls from far-off Tyrone, and Graham lay on the sofa pining after the next one, a great soft lump. Young love. Malky said it would pass, give it a month. But one morning, a bit more than a month later, Graham was gone. His bed was made, and a note taped to the kettle: *back themorrow*. And he was too, with Lindsey, who was seventeen and six weeks pregnant.

It floored her; Brenda wasn't going to deny it. But there they were, standing hand in hand in her kitchen, both smiling so much she could feel the happiness off them, like heat.

She and Malky lay awake again that night, and most nights that followed, keeping their voices hushed so as the kids wouldn't hear them across the hallway. It was hard to know where to start,

and it felt like hours could pass with them both just lying silent in the dark. Even Malky, who said life was for getting on with.

They couldn't have a go about their ages: Brenda was nineteen when they'd had their first, and Malky not much older. He said:

'We've nae leg tae stand on.'

But they'd grown up just two Drumchapel streets apart, they'd known each other most of their lives, so Brenda whispered:

'Graham's only known her five minutes.'

Graham took Lindsey all around Drumchapel. On days he wasn't at college for his certificates, he took her to see his band pals and round his brothers' houses, Craig's and Brian's and Malky Jnr's. Perching on the three-piece-suites with all the nieces and the nephews, all their young faces turned to the new girl come from Ireland. Brenda thought Graham was showing her off, and she couldn't blame him. She told Malky:

'It's a lovely face she has, right enough. An the way she carries hersel.'

Few on the scheme would have thought Graham could catch such a fine thing, and now he took her everywhere he went. Even if it was just out to buy milk. Mostly he went on his bike, with Lindsey sitting side-saddle on the rack at the back, and Brenda told Malky she watched them from the windows, cycling up the long wind from the shops, past all the long grey blocks. She said she followed Lindsey's eyes, to all the different close-mouths and the salt-streaked damp under the tenement windows, and Brenda wondered: maybe it was city life the girl had wanted, only now here she was, on the far western fringes. The girl kept her fingers hooked into Graham's belt loops, her arms rising and falling while he stood on the pedals; her spine

dead straight, arms slender, all her limbs, and her face showing nothing, but taking everything in.

'She's upped sticks tae come here.'

The girl had left hearth and home, and so Brenda worried now: if Drumchapel didn't match up. Or Graham for that matter.

'Hard tae know. What goes on inside that heid.'

Brenda was used to daughters-in-law: she and Malky had three already, and she'd found a way to rub along with all of them. But Lindsey kept herself to herself, so Brenda had to work at drawing this one out. Night by night, she told Malky the bits and scraps she'd turned up:

'The girl's mother walked out. A few years back now. Wae no contact since.'

Graham had let that much slip; when he came in from college and Brenda was banging the pots about in the kitchen because Lindsey had spent the entire day holed up in his bedroom.

Malky sighed at the news. It was too dark to see his face, but Brenda knew what he meant: a stray was all they needed. She said:

'You can see how that would hurt a girl, but.'

'Aye, right enough.'

It was probably still too hurtful for Lindsey to tell them herself. They'd both learned fast that the girl didn't like too much being asked, especially about home and her family. Venture a question, or an *only tryin tae help here*, and she'd close down on them, swift, and dead fierce with it. *Did I ask you?*

Brenda knew it could take years to build up trust, and they only had months. They had to know Lindsey better, before the baby arrived, so she told Malky:

'I tried again tonight.'

She'd pushed Graham's legs off the sofa, and sat down in front of the telly with them.

'Shouldae seen their faces.'

The memory made her laugh, and Malky too, and it felt like they needed to laugh just then, about this girl turned up, and how both of them felt so clueless. Brenda said the girl sat well back in the cushions, the whole time she was in the room, like she had to keep the solid width of Graham between them.

'I had tae look tae Graham for most ae the answers. An we both know he's spare wae words at the best ae times.'

Brenda shook her head:

'It was like pullin teeth. I didnae get much. I made a start.'

She'd got some names and places. It sounded like the girl had uncles and cousins all over Tyrone and beyond.

'It was just her and her Dad at home, but.'

It was speaking to Lindsey's Dad that made the difference. Brenda called him while the lovebirds were out and about and Malky was driving his cab. She found the number in among the bus tickets in Graham's pockets, and she wasn't proud of sneaking about, but the girl had been with them a good three weeks by then, and Brenda couldn't be certain: if she'd told her family where she was, or even about the baby. Lindsey had brushed off that question every time she'd asked.

'She's told me.'

Lindsey's father didn't sound best pleased to get a call. Brenda had expected him to be relieved, even if he was angry as well, but all he said was:

'She's told me not to expect her any time soon.'

He left the talking up to Brenda, the whole first half of the conversation, and she thought at least she knew where Lindsey got that stubborn streak. But he put her in mind of her own Dad too: hard-bitten. Papa Robert had got too bloody good at the silent treatment; he took the hurt of his own life and turned it on his children. Brenda hadn't even caught the worst of it, that fell to her brother: Eric had spent years on the receiving end. It drove the family apart, left Eric out on his lonely limb. But all that was passed now, and too hard to think about. And Brenda didn't want schisms anyhow, not in yet another generation, so she was careful to keep Lindsey's Dad on side:

'We're aw still reelin, aye. Take us aw a while.'

Brenda thought maybe it worked, because he did say a bit more after that. About how the baby had come as a shock, but not that his daughter had run off.

'We've borne our share of the Troubles in this town, as you're maybe aware. Lindsey seems to believe, as her mother did, in cutting and running.'

He was for holding fast; Brenda thought she could hear just what kind of Ulsterman he was. It didn't make her feel easy.

Then Lindsey's father sighed:

'She knows where her home is.'

And he didn't sound so bitter. More just tired. Of his girl, or maybe just his life. It was a hard place he lived in, Brenda thought; she wouldn't wish it on anyone. And then he told her:

'Lindsey's been away before now, and she's always come home again.'

It gave her heart, that he could say that. Even if he spoke like his girl was a dead weight. A disappointment. It didn't seem right to talk like that, not to someone he'd never met, not about his own child. But Brenda knew the weight of her own boys:

much as she loved them, there were times they felt like four great stones. So she said:

'They keep us fae slipping away wae the tide, anyhow.'

And Lindsey's Dad managed a laugh, tight and short:

'Aye, well. That's one way to look at it.'

Brenda was glad when that call was over, but it gave her new eyes on Lindsey. The girl carried the marks of her hardline Dad and hometown, and Brenda thought she could see her softening.

On days she went cleaning, Brenda was first out the door, and it was none too easy to go toiling when everyone else was still in their beds, especially because there'd be more of the same scrubbing and wiping when she got back. Only when Brenda came home towards tea time that next week, Lindsey had mostly put her hand to something about the house: she'd washed the breakfast things, or been to the shops with Brenda's message list. One night she was even peeling the potatoes.

The girl gave a small smile, wry, when she saw Brenda, stopped short in the kitchen doorway.

'Only trying to help here.'

It was a treat to come home to that: a first chink in the girl's armour plating, plus a good meal into the bargain. It was just the two of them at the table, because Malky was on lates, and it was one of Graham's college days when he didn't get in till after dark. Brenda used to have a houseful, she still couldn't get accustomed to empty rooms, and she found herself thinking: what would a house be like with just that Dad and his girl?

She watched as Lindsey set out their plates. The girl had no belly, not yet, no boobs, no weight on those narrow bones, but

she dished the food with practised hands. And then Brenda thought there were some places, some families, that made kids grow up too fast.

She was still turning things over when Malky got in. Brenda sat up in bed while he took off his work clothes, and she said:

'I'd have mebbe made mysel scarce. If I was that man's girl.'

It made Malky smile, hearing her talk:

'You gonnae make it better, aye? This girl's life.'

A part of Brenda wanted to do that, but she waved Malky off, like she wasn't that daft:

'I'm just sayin.'

Maybe Lindsey had good reason for wanting a new start.

'The girl's no chosen the easiest path, but.'

Brenda told him how she'd been trying to picture Lindsey with a child: all that graft, how she'd manage. Malky said:

'She'll manage.'

Like he'd made up his mind. He'd only known the girl a month, but Brenda knew Malky could do that, without lots of wailing and wringing of hands. He said:

'She'll have you tae help. If she wants it or no.'

Malky laughed, properly this time, and then Brenda had to join in. She'd already caught herself that evening, thinking about the baby, starting to look forward. She was going to be a Gran again, and being a Gran was the best thing.

Soon Lindsey had been with them three months, then six. It was winter, and then, it was coming up for spring. Graham got

himself work, and got his City and Guilds, and the lovebirds sat shoulder to shoulder in the evenings, out the front of the close, bike abandoned below them on the tussocky slope. Brenda still watched them down there sometimes, watching Lindsey especially; the tilt of her red head, and that small, round tell-tale belly, like a pillow stuffed under her sweatshirt.

The girl still didn't say much when it was just the two of them in the house. But Brenda saw the way she looked up, when she heard Graham's key in the door: like he was a relief, like she'd been waiting all day. It made Brenda glad for her boy, and it soothed her worries, and she decided it was best to leave Lindsey in peace on their quiet kitchen evenings.

It was April and early when Brenda was woken by a knock. It took her a moment to come round. The sun was just up beyond the curtains, and there was Lindsey, standing in the hallway, all dressed, her wee hands pressed across her pillow-bump:

'Might be time now.'

She whispered it, frightened, blinking in the half-light.

'Will you come with us, Brenda? To the hospital. Please?'

It gave her such a lift to be asked, she could have lifted the girl down the stairs. Could have strode with her coal-carry down the road. But Brenda remembered her own four births, and what Lindsey had just ahead.

'You give Graham a shake, hen. I'll get Malky tae drive us there.'