

— the wolves in the woods —

## O

Malcolm ran. One hand curled against his chest, the wrist swollen and aching, the fingers numb and almost black in the sickly yellow street-light. The other hand clenched around the strap of his tatty old rucksack. Ancient trainers squealing on the slippery cobbles as the rain battered down.

Breathing hard.

Teeth bared.

Tears blurring the shuttered shops and parked cars that lined Archers Lane.

Sobbing out the words as he tried to put as much distance between himself and the wolves: 'Please God. Please God, no. Please, please, please, please, please . . .'

Behind him, a high-pitched howl echoed through the night.

'Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease . . .'

At the end of the street, he hammered around the corner onto the Chanonry, feet skidding out from underneath him, sending him crashing into the boot of a rust-brown hatchback hard enough to set the car's alarm screaming. Lights flashing angry orange as he scrambled upright and staggered out into the road. Three o'clock in the morning and the houses on both sides of the road were in darkness: no one peering out their windows to see what all the fuss was about. No one to witness what was happening. No one to save him.

What was the point of bloody car alarms if everyone just ignored them?

He hauled in a breath and bellowed it out again. 'SOMEBODY HELP ME!'

A curtain twitched on the other side of the road.

Malcolm waved his good arm, the rucksack swinging like a grubby metronome, but whoever it was, they just let the curtains fall shut again.

‘HELP ME, YOU BASTARDS!’

Another howl joined the hatchback’s wails.

Oh God: they were getting *closer*.

He backed away from the car. ‘Pleasepleasepleaseplease . . .’

There – just ahead – a big Range Rover coming towards him, headlights slashing through the rain. The driver would help. They *had* to help.

‘STOP!’ Malcolm lurched into the middle of the tarmac. ‘PLEASE! HELP ME!’

The four-by-four didn’t even slow down, just blared its horn.

‘NO!’ Jumping back, out of the way, but not quite quick enough. The windscreen caught his rucksack and sent it spinning from his hand to bounce off the roof of a parked Volvo.

The Range Rover slammed on its brakes, window buzzing down to let too-loud music *bmmmmmtch-bmmmmmtch-bmmmmmtch* out, followed by a bug-eyed woman’s face. ‘IF YOU’VE SCRATCHED MY CAR, I’M GOING TO KILL YOU!’

‘Please, you’ve got to help me! They’re coming!’ Malcolm staggered towards the car, good arm outstretched, dirty fingers reaching. ‘Please, they’re going to kill me!’

‘Eeewww . . .’ Top lip curled, she shrank away from him. ‘GET AWAY FROM ME, YOU HOMELESS FREAK!’ And the window buzzed back up again.

Malcolm was inches from the door handle when the car shot forwards, accelerating away up the Chanonry in a cloud of choking diesel fumes.

‘THEY’RE GOING TO KILL ME!’

The flashing orange lights went out, and the hatchback’s alarm fell silent.

Now the only sounds were his wheezing lungs, battering heart, and the rain’s never-ending rattlesnake-hiss.

A shrill laugh sliced through the night. It was answered by another howl – this time from the other side of the street, behind the Volvo, where Malcolm’s rucksack had disappeared.

They weren’t close any more: they were *here*.

And now they had his rucksack.

He backed away from everything he owned in the whole world.

Swallowed as the wolves growled from the shadows.

RUN!

Malcolm lurched away, towards the end of the street, where the tarmac ended in a row of bollards and a lone streetlight stood guard against the murky blackness of Camburn Woods.

The woods.

He could lose them there.

Miles and miles of twisting paths and abandoned building and trees and trees and trees.

His trainers splashed through a puddle that stretched the width of the road. Faster. Passing the bollards and in beneath the thick dark canopy of needles, branches, and leaves, following the tarmac path.

That rattlesnake hiss was muffled by the trees, the air thick with the heavy brown scent of mouldering forest floor.

Behind him: the sound of small feet pounded the track; laughter; snarling.

Malcolm gritted his teeth and *ran*. Pumping his knees and elbow. Breath wheezing in and rasping out. Wet trainers slap, slap, slapping against the path. Sweat, clammy between his shoulder blades. Razors slashing through his ruined hand and wrist.

A crossroads appeared up ahead. The signpost pointed left to Castle Hill Infirmary, right to Saxon Halls of Residence, but Malcolm went straight ahead, following the arrow for Rushworth House. For five, four, three, two—

He made a sudden turn, ducking right, leaving the path and crashing into a waist-high sea of nettles. Running and stumbling through the undergrowth as darkness wrapped its arms around him.

Those little feet scuttered to a halt on the path, and a lone howl rang out.

A high voice followed it: 'YOU CAN'T RUN FOREVER, LITTLE PIGGY!'

And they were after him again.

No idea what the building used to be, but it was little more than a ruined outline now, buried deep within Camburn Woods – half its roof missing, the upper floor bulging out above the doorway, like a drowned man's stomach. Ready to split.

There wasn't much of a clearing: barely enough space between the

trees to let the rain clatter down on the crumbling slates and whisper in the jagged brambles. Bracken reaching for him with wet green tentacles. That small patch of sky up above glowing a dirty orange-brown, letting in just enough light to make out shapes and outlines.

Off in the distance, something rustled and Malcolm froze, crouched beneath the searching branches of a twisted oak. Might be a badger or a fox? Or it might be the wolves . . .

Hard to tell what time it was, after crashing through bushes and nettles and brambles and broom for what felt like hours, till the sound of the wolves faded behind him. Then creeping about in the gloom, guarding every breath in case it might give him away. And now he was here. Soaked and exhausted, but still alive.

The rustling got quieter and quieter, until he was alone again.

Thank God.

Malcolm clutched his knee with his good hand and let the breath whoomph out of him. Tears warm on his cheeks as he shuddered and moaned. Biting his bottom lip to keep the noise to a minimum.

It was a while before he straightened up, wiped his eyes on the sodden sleeve of his new jacket, and limped across the tiny clearing and into the house. All he needed was a quiet corner, somewhere out of the rain to lie low till morning. Somewhere the wolves wouldn't find him. Get his arse to Accident and Emergency, soon as it was safe. Maybe leave town with a pocketful of pilfered drugs and a zip-a-dee-doo-dah in his heart. Head south to somewhere warmer, like Dundee, or even Edinburgh. After all, when you were sleeping rough, one shop doorway was pretty much like any other. Oldcastle could go screw itself.

Wooden floorboards creaked beneath his torn, sodden trainers as he scuffed into the dark interior.

Wasn't like the city had exactly been good to him, was it? Thirty-four years old and what did he have to show for it? A shattered wrist, a crappy sleeping bag from the army surplus store on Weaver Street, and a manky backpack . . .

No. Didn't even have that any more.

The wolves had taken it all.

Everything except the half-bottle of Asda own-brand whisky in his coat pocket – which was about to get a serious spanking.

\*

‘Wmmmmphaaaaargh!’ Malcolm’s eyes snapped open in the darkness, face wet, water running into his ears and soaking into his T-shirt.

A little girl loomed over him, features lit from below like she was about to tell a ghost story. Her voice was posh and clipped – polished marble and cut glass. ‘Here we go. Knew you were in there somewhere.’ She couldn’t have been more than ten or eleven, big blue eyes staring at him above her tartan facemask as she waggled an almost empty bottle of water in her gloved hand. ‘Wouldn’t do for you to miss the grand finale, would it?’ She was dressed up in a baseball cap and hoodie – both advertising rival crappy pop bands. Tracksuit bottoms and a pair of mud-smearred Nikes. Her hair was tucked away out of sight, but the freckles visible above her facemask and those pale-orange eyebrows meant she was a redhead in real life. Gloves and a facemask: like the pandemic had never ended.

‘Gah . . .’ Malcolm scabbled back against the wall, levering himself up till he was sitting. Wiped the water from his face with his good hand. The whisky’s warmth leeching out of his bones, leaving that old, familiar, thirsty tremor behind. ‘You can’t just come in—’

‘Do shut up.’ She looked over her shoulder. ‘Are you recording?’

A large boy emerged from the gloom. About the size of a vending machine, broad-shouldered, big barrel chest, an iPhone clutched in his blue-nitrile-covered paw. Couldn’t see his mouth, because of the skull-print facemask, but the smile in his eyes was clear enough. He sounded even posher than she did: ‘Indubitably.’ One of those accents that boomed with privilege, private education, and a sheltered upbringing. ‘Worry not, my dear Allegra; Hugo has got it covered.’

The girl, Allegra, glowered at him. ‘Don’t use our names, you *utter* nimrod!’

‘Oh.’ Hugo’s shoulders rounded, eyes going all puppy dog. ‘But there’s no one else here, and this unfortunate gentleman will be dead soon, so—’

‘You’re recording this! Now our names are on the footage!’

‘Ah. Yes. I see.’ A nod. ‘Quite right. *Mea culpa*. Stupid Hugo.’ He fiddled with his phone. ‘OK, I’ve definitely deleted that one. Let’s try this again, keep it anonymous, and all that.’

Malcolm stared at the pair of them. ‘Wait, what do you mean, “this unfortunate gentleman will be”—’

The slap wasn't the hardest he'd ever had, but it came out of nowhere and jerked his head to the side, leaving the edge of his mouth stinging.

A squeak of nitrile as Allegra rubbed at her slapping hand. 'Did I say you could talk?'

'You're bloody children! You don't scare me!'

'Oh dear. That's unfortunate, isn't it?'

'Aha! Yes.' Hugo inched closer. 'Most unfortunate *indeed*.' He reached into the pocket of his hoodie and pulled out a long thin parcel wrapped in newspaper. About eighteen inches long. 'Still, "The goat will bleat till its throat is slit." As my dear grandmama always says.' He unwrapped the newspaper parcel, one-handed, and a kitchen knife's long curved blade gleamed in the light from his phone.

Malcolm pushed himself further into the wall. 'You . . . don't scare me. I'm a police officer!'

Allegra shook her head, reaching into her own hoodie pocket. 'Not any more, you're not: they fired you years ago.' The hand came out, wrapped around the handle of a claw hammer. The one she'd used to wake Malcolm up two hours ago, when he'd been sleeping in the doorway of McCartney's Hair and Beauty, minding his own business and not bothering anyone.

Just seeing it made his swollen wrist burn and throb. 'You can't do this, it's—'

'Do you think we picked you at random, Malcolm? Because we didn't.'

'Fortune favours the prepared, old man.'

'We've been tracking you all day.' She flexed her gloved fingers around the hammer's grip. 'Don't you want to know how we found you tonight? Here? In the woods so dark and deep? All hidden away like a frightened little mouse?'

'If . . . if you go away now, you won't get into any trouble. I promise.'

Her voice jumped up a bit, taking on a saccharine lisp. 'Oh, you *poor* man, you look so cold in that tatty old jacket! Daddy says I can spend my birthday money on anything I like, and I'd like to help *you!*'

It's a frigid Monday lunchtime and Malcolm's in his usual spot, outside the train station, sitting cross-legged on his square of cardboard and his sleeping bag, a battered wax-paper cup on the pavement in front of him. Huffing a steaming breath into his cupped hands, trying to get some life

back in his frozen fingers. Huddling in the threadbare coat he ‘inherited’ when Sparky Steve got taken off with the Covid. The coat with ragged cuffs, holes in the elbows, and a big stain down the back.

So much for the Super Scorching Scottish Summer the tabloids had promised. Since when was August colder than February? And people *still* said global warming was a load of old—

*‘Excuse me?’*

He looks up and there’s a pretty little red-haired girl, holding a bag from Primark that’s almost as big as she is. Pigtails. Freckles. Tartan skirt. Blue school blazer with some sort of crest on the pocket, so her parents must be worth a bob or two.

He gives her his best I’m-so-pitiful smile. ‘Got any spare change?’

‘Oh, you *poor* man, you look so cold in that tatty old jacket! Daddy says I can spend my birthday money on anything I like, and I’d like to help *you!*’ She holds the bag out towards him. ‘It’s so you don’t catch your death.’

He pulls his chin in and frowns at her for a moment. Is she taking the piss? Playing ‘Mock the Poor Homeless Bastard’? Is she going to scream ‘Paedo!’ at him if he goes anywhere near?

She places the bag on the pavement in front of him, then digs into her pocket and comes out with a tenner. Drops that in his empty cup. ‘Now you can get something tasty to eat too!’ All perky and helpful.

So Malcolm opens the bag and takes out a nice new padded jacket – one of the dark-red shiny kind that look a bit like a duvet with sleeves. Stares at it. Then at her. Then at the jacket again.

Licks his lips.

Feels actual tears welling up. He chokes the knot out of his voice for long enough to give her a mumbled, ‘Thank you. It’s . . . Thank you.’

‘Put it on! Put it on!’

And Malcolm wriggles his way out of Sparky Steve’s manky jacket and into the brand-new padded one. Warm and cosy and the nicest thing anyone’s done for him for years. ‘*Thank you.*’

‘I sewed a GPS tag into the lining. My companion here’s been tracking you on his phone.’

‘Like a veritable *bloodhound*. Keen of eye and sharp of nose.’ Hugo raised the blade. ‘And knife, of course. Mustn’t forget the knife.’

Malcolm's back pressed hard against the wall. Voice wobbling. 'Please, I don't want to die . . .'

'I know, but sometimes that's just how life is. Some people live happily ever after; some people get stabbed. Or strangled. Or battered with a hammer.' She patted the claw hammer's metal head against her gloved palm. 'Or torn open like a bloody envelope.'

'Please, you don't have to do this!' Tears made the dark little room blur.

'Or, in your case, an unfortunate mix of the above.'

'Stiff upper lip, old man.' Hugo held the phone out for a close-up. 'Nobody likes a cry baby.'

*'Please! I don't—'*

Then the hammer slashed down, and the world screamed its very last breath.

— bless me, Father, for I have sinned —

# I

Right.

Michelle checked herself in the mirror again: make-up perfect, auburn waves hairsprayed into submission, bright smile without a hint of lipstick on her teeth. Cupping a hand over a huffed-out breath revealed a reassuring minty freshness, too.

First day on the job and she was good to go.

All she needed now was a customer.

There – the lanky middle-aged woman, scowling away at the shelves of painkillers. Black overcoat on over a red-and-white striped top, mousey-blond hair that was *far* too long for someone that age, skin like blanched milk, and a strong chin with a dimple at its point. She'd clearly gone for the 'natural' look, and it didn't suit her at all. And those thick-black-framed glasses didn't exactly help. Still, it was *amazing* what a bit of make-up – properly applied by a newly qualified professional like Michelle – could do.

The woman plucked a packet of paracetamol from the shelf and clacked towards the checkouts on a pair of Cuban-heeled boots. Which meant she'd have to walk right past Michelle's station, little knowing that her world was about to become a little bit brighter.

Michelle nodded to herself, keeping her voice low. 'Remember your training, Michelle, you've got this.' Then cranked her smile up another notch.

It was time to make a difference!

Lucy squinted one eye shut against the knife-sharp sun slashing its way in through the shop window. Sparking off the harsh white floor tiles,

glass bottles, and jars, as if it was trying to stab its way right into her already throbbing brain.

It was too hot in here as well, the heating turned way up to depths-of-winter levels – even though it was only early September – transforming the overcoat she'd pulled on that morning into an instrument of torture. Only been in here fifteen minutes and already her top was sticking to her back.

'Excuse me, madam? Hello?' An orange-faced horror with too much blusher, drawn-on eyebrows, and a white smock top, popped out from behind one of the make-up counters, blocking Lucy's way. Holding up an open palm-sized tub of something greasy. 'I know crow's feet can be *such* a worry for middle-aged ladies, but, great news, now there's an organic alternative to Botox!'

'Middle-aged?' Lucy glared at her. 'I'm twenty-six!'

'Ah.' The idiot hid the bottle behind her back and snatched up a couple of lipsticks instead. 'Well, perhaps, with your *classical* pale complexion, I could tempt you to a *slightly* brighter lipstick? Bewitching Coral? Or Pink Brandy?' Pointing them both at Lucy's mouth. 'Because that shade's really *far* too insipid for you.'

'I'm not wearing any make-up!'

The fake smile faltered. 'Then . . . now's the perfect opportunity to start?'

'Gah!' Lucy pushed past her and stomped over to the queue for the tills.

Of course, the self-service ones were all out of order, so there was no option but to shuffle forward, inch by painful inch, past the newspapers, magazines, and low-sugar sweets – arranged to corral the punters on their miserable death march towards the counter. Which *clearly* should've been manned by three people, but had been abandoned instead to the care of a single teenager with a permanent sniff who scanned people's purchases as if she was doing them a huge personal favour.

Insipid? Crow's feet? Middle-aged?

Like *she* was a sodding oil painting, with her face like a constipated Oompa Loompa.

Cheeky cow.

Lucy kept her head down, avoiding the treacherous sunlight, her one

open eye drifting across the publications: ‘LOVE ISLAND STD THREE-SOME SHOCKER!’, ‘STRICTLY COME DRUGS RAID’, ‘MY SECRET WEIGHT-LOSS HELL!’, ‘SEX-PEST POSTIE STOLE MY HEART & MY CAT!’ The crappy tabloids were just as bad: ‘RANDY RHYNIE’S “RUSSIAN ROMP” RUMOURS’, ‘MIGRANTS “SWAMPING NHS” SAYS HERO COUNCILLOR’, and ‘JOCK COPS CAN’T CATCH CREEPY KILLER’.

Which was a bit unfair.

Even if it was true.

That last headline sat above a grainy photo of an empty, dilapidated room – ragged holes in the floorboards, pale blotches bleached into the crumbling walls.

A smaller picture was set into it: Abby Geddes gazing out at the world with tired eyes, mouth drooping at the edges, short brown hair rumped and unstyled. Almost as if she—

‘Hello?’ It was barked out in an imperious male voice, right behind Lucy, followed by a tut. ‘Are you actually in this queue, or are you just browsing?’

Tosser.

Lucy turned, nice and slow, straightened her glasses, and gave the gangly dick in the pinstripe suit a lopsided dose of the evil eye. Baring her teeth. ‘You want to *repeat* that, sunshine?’

Pink rushed up from the collar of his shirt, flooding his cheeks, making it look as if his tie was tied far too tight. He stepped back. ‘I . . . er . . .’ Taking a sudden interest in his polished brogues. ‘I was . . . It’s your turn.’ One hand coming up to tremble at the counter.

She nodded, then took her time, ambling over to the bored spotty teenager. Thumped her packet of paracetamol down on the till’s stainless-steel weighing plate.

There was a pause. Some chewing. Then words slumped out on a wave of stomach-clenching spearmint, twisted into a strangled Kingsmeath accent: ‘You want a Chocolate Orange? It’s on offer, like. Buy one, get one half price, and that.’

‘No.’

The till beeped as the pills were scanned.

And then a smile bloomed across the girl’s face, rearranging the pattern of blackheads and zits. ‘Here, you’re that woman, aren’t you?’

Lucy dug the debit card out of her wallet. ‘No.’

‘Aye, you are: you’re that detective sergeant woman. We learnt all about you, in Media Studies! You and that bloke, whatshisname, Nigel something-or-other. Black. Neil Black! That’s the boy.’

The card reader chimed out the purchase and Lucy snatched up her pills. ‘No, I’m not!’ She marched off, heels hammering the tiles out onto Jessop Street, into the crisp morning air. Even if it was laden with the pale-blue scent of exhaust fumes as cars and vans rumbled by.

The Dunk raised an eyebrow as she tore her way into the paracetamol. He was barely taller than the postbox he leaned against, with a plump little face besmirched by a thin goatee-soul-patch-and-moustache thing that didn’t make him look anywhere near as much like Tony Stark as he clearly thought it did. He’d squeezed himself into his trademark black polo neck, with black jeans, black sunglasses, and a dark-grey leather jacket. A languid cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth.

Let’s face it, the boy was one French beret and a pair of bongos away from going full-on beatnik. But on the plus side, he’d done what he’d been told and got the coffees in.

The Dunk held out one of the two large wax-paper cups. ‘Caramel latte macchiato with chocolate sprinkles.’

‘Breakfast of champions’ She knocked back a couple of pills, washing them down with a sip of hot sweet coffee goodness.

He pursed his chubby lips. ‘Have you *still* got that headache?’

‘We’re going to be late.’ She strode off down the street – the Dunk struggling to keep up on his short little legs.

He broke into a semi-jog, drawing level with her shoulder. ‘Only I’m pretty sure that if a hangover lasts more than two months, you should see a doctor.’ He shook his head. Thinning a bit at the back there. Not very Tony-Stark-like at all. ‘At the very least, cut back on the booze.’

‘Very funny. You’re like a modern-day Bernard Manning. post Caused by having to work with weirdos like *you* all day.’

A busker had set up on the corner, by the lights, dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and flip-flops – a brave fashion choice for Scotland in September – warbling his way through a bland reggae cover of something vaguely recognisable:

*‘Your love’s got me shivering, like a disease,  
I splutter and sweat, I go weak at the knees,*

*Your love, it's infectious, and I'm just defenceless,  
I'm burnin' up, baby, don't need no vaccines . . .'*

Not exactly in the best of taste.

They bustled across St Jasper's Lane, nipping between a bendy bus and a grubby-brown Renault van, emerging opposite the King James Theatre with its elaborate yellow-brick-and-pink-granite façade, featuring lurid billboards for upcoming performances – 'CHRISTMAS PANTO: SKELETON BOB AND THE GOBLINS WHO STOLE SANTA, TICKETS ON SALE NOW!', 'CASTLE HILL OPERA SOCIETY PRESENTS: THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS', and 'SIGN UP FOR SUPERSPANKYBINGOSWANKY-WEDNESDAYS! ~ BIG PRIZES EVERY WEEK!!!'. Because, apparently, being classy was overrated and . . .

Lucy stopped outside a small newsagent with one of those fake sandwich-board things screwed to the wall by the door. 'CASTLE NEWS & POST: FAMILIES' FEARS AS HUNT FOR BLOODSMITH FALLS FLAT'.

'Sarge?'

A flush of heat spread across the base of her neck, creeping upwards as it turned into that horrible, familiar prickling feeling – as if someone was watching her. Snatching the breath in her throat, setting her heart rattling. But when she spun around, fists clenched, it was just the usual assortment of shoppers and tradespeople, going about their business. Both legal and otherwise.

Wait a minute: there *was* someone watching her from the other side of the road: a tall, thin man, with a big forehead surrounded by curly brown hair. Beard and moustache. Corduroy jacket, like a supply teacher. Small round glasses that hid his eyes, but not the bags underneath them. And he was just standing there, staring.

Like a weirdo.

A large white van drifted by, blocking him from view, 'HAVE YOU TRIED SCOTIABRAND CHICKEN MACSPORRANS YET? THEY'RE CLUCKING TASTY!' in a lurid typeface down the side, with a happy mother feeding her little boy something revolting and flattened-Dalek shaped. And when the van had passed, there was no sign of the man.

'Sarge?' The Dunk poked her arm. 'You OK, Sarge? Only you look like someone's just shat on your grave.'

'Never mind.' Probably just a pervert anyway. Wasn't as if the city

didn't have more than its fair share. And as long as he stuck to staring, that was fine. Creepy, but Christ knew it was better than the alternative. Lucy strode off again, going a bit faster this time so the Dunk had to abandon his semi-jog for a full-blown loping one instead.

The wee sod puffed and panted at her side, cigarette bouncing along – spilling ash down his jacket's lapels. 'Seriously, though: who's Bernard Manning?'

'God's sake, I'm only three years older than you, I'm not your granny. Because, let's face it, if *I* was related to you, you wouldn't be so repugantly ugly.'

'All right, all right. Thank you, Sergeant Sarcastic.' The Dunk dodged a couple of schoolkids who probably should've been in class at quarter past ten on a Wednesday morning, instead of hanging about outside a shuttered off-licence smoking fags. 'So, what do you think the big briefing's going to be about?'

'Probably giving us all medals and a bonus for doing *such* a bang-up job of catching the Bloodsmith.'

'Oh . . .' He drooped a bit at that. 'Well . . . maybe there's been a breakthrough, or something, you know?'

'You're probably right. After all, it's early days, isn't it? Only been after the bastard for *seventeen* months.' She took a left onto Peel Place. 'What's a year and a half between friends?'

Halfway down, O Division Headquarters loomed in all its brutalist glory. The red-brick Victorian monstrosity jutted out from the picturesque ivory-sandstone buildings that lined the street, as if the genteel terrace had suffered a prolapse.

'Yeah, but it's not like we haven't been trying, is it?'

'Seventeen months, Dunk. And we're no nearer than we were on day one.'

Lucy slipped out of the briefing room, closing the door behind her, shutting off the bored chatter of two dozen plainclothes and uniformed officers.

DI Tudor paced back and forth along the corridor, face creased and taut at the same time, one arm hugging a stack of paperwork like a teddy bear, leaving the other hand free so he could chew at his fingernails. Tall and broad-shouldered, with a jet-black *Peaky Blinders* short back and

sides that somehow didn't look ridiculous above serious eyes and salt-and-pepper designer stubble. In another life, he could probably have been a catalogue model – a rugged middle-aged man on a cold-looking beach somewhere, with his fake ash-blond wife, both wearing matching chinos and rugby shirts: 'BUY TWO, SAVE £10!'

'You OK, Boss?'

He kept on pacing. 'Everyone ready?'

'Is something wrong?'

His mouth pulled out and down. 'They've put me in charge of the investigation. *Sole* charge.'

'Oh . . .' Lucy frowned. Bit her top lip. Nodded. 'That's not good.'

'Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, DS McVeigh!'

'You know that's not what I mean, Boss.'

'Apparently DCI Ross has more *active* investigations requiring his supervision, but, and I quote, "The High Heidyins have complete faith in my ability to bring Operation Maypole to a swift and satisfactory conclusion."' Tudor stopped pacing and covered his face with his chewed hand. 'I am so screwed.'

Hard not to feel sorry for the poor sod. 'So, first Superintendent Spence bails and lumbers DCI Ross with it, now DCI Ross hands you the stinky baby and does a runner.'

'Bad enough as it is, without you rubbing it in.' Tudor slumped back against the wall. 'Think it's too late to go off on the sick?'

Lucy shrugged. 'Maybe we'll get lucky and solve this thing?'

His face soured. 'Fat bloody chance.' Then Tudor gave himself a shake. Pulled on the kind of smile that was meant to convey sincerity and sympathy. 'Listen to me, moaning on. I should've asked how *you're* doing.'

She froze for a couple of breaths, then mirrored his fake smile. 'Never better.'

'Only, if you need to talk or anything . . . ? My, you know, my door's always open, right?'

God, could this *get* any more awkward?

'I'm fine. Thanks for asking. Keen to get on with things: catch this bastard.'

'Yeah.' Tudor nodded, then gave himself another shake, like an old Labrador coming in from the rain. 'Show no fear.' He pulled himself up to his full six-three and nodded at her. 'Come on, then.'

Lucy opened the door and he strode through, into the office, as if the world lay at his feet.

Amazing what a bit of self-delusion could do.

She followed him in.

Operation Maypole filled the big incident room on the third floor. Four mean, narrow windows punctured the far wall – separated by corkboards thumbtacked with memos and mugshots and crime-scene photos – glaring across the potholed car park behind O Division Headquarters to the boarded-up carpet warehouse that backed onto it. Vague hints of Camburn Woods just visible over the rooftops in the distance. Digital whiteboards lined the whole side wall, covered in notes and lines and boxes and process-flow diagrams. A small kitchen area was recessed into the grey rank of filing cabinets opposite the whiteboards, leaving the last wall to pinned-up actions and the kind of posters Police Scotland mistakenly believed were motivational, rather than deeply depressing.

The rest of the room was packed with cubicles, desks, office chairs, and DI Tudor's team – all two dozen of them. There were even signs hanging from the ceiling, marking out each specialist unit: 'HOLMES', 'FAMILY LIAISON', 'SEARCH', 'DOOR TO DOOR', 'INTERVIEW', 'PRODUCTIONS', and 'COMMAND'. Which had seemed like a good idea at the time, even if it bore no real relationship to the way things actually worked.

'All right, people!' Tudor thumped his stack of paperwork down on the table at the front of the room and the babble of voices stuttered to a halt. 'Thank you. I'm sure you've all seen the papers this morning.' He picked up a copy of the *Glasgow Tribune* in one hand and a *Daily Standard* in the other, holding them up so everyone could see the front pages. 'OLDCASTLE POLICE "INEPT AND FLAILING" SAY GRIEVING FAMILIES' and that old favourite: 'JOCK COPS CAN'T CATCH CREEPY KILLER'.

Someone at the back of the room booed.

'My feelings exactly.' The papers got dumped on the floor. 'As of today, I've been placed in sole command of Operation Maypole.'

A few of the older officers made eye contact with Lucy and winced at that, but they kept their mouths shut.

'I know it feels like we haven't made a lot of progress in the last seventeen months, but that changes *now*. Angus?'

One of the officers who'd shared a wince held up a biro in his podgy, hairy hand. He'd probably been clean-shaven at the start of the shift, but now his jowls were coloured a heavy blue-grey, tufts of black sprouting out of his shirt collar. Just a shame he couldn't grow any of it on his big shiny boiled-egg head. 'Guv.'

'Your team goes over the interview transcripts and witness statements. I want everything reviewed.'

A small grimace of pain, but Angus kept it out of his voice. 'Will do.'

'Emma? Your team does the same with our twenty-six ex-suspects. Have another crack at their alibis: see if we can't move a few of them back into the "might-be-our-killer" column.'

A middle-aged woman with an explosion of rusty curls and a hard teuchter accent nodded. 'Guv.' But you could tell she'd just died a little inside.

Then, section by section, Tudor handed out all the back-to-square-one assignments – trying to make it sound as if this was a real chance for progress, rather than a *massive* setback – and sent the teams on their way, until there was no one left but him, Lucy, and the Dunk.

She nodded at the whiteboard, with its list of ticked-off tasks. 'What about us, Boss?'

'I need you and DC Fraser to go over all the crime scenes again. Fresh pair of eyes. Start at the beginning and work your way through.' His smile slipped a bit. 'There has to be *something* we missed. Something that'll—'

A knock on the doorframe and a chubby PC stuck her head into the room. 'Sorry, Guv, but there's a visitor downstairs for DS McVeigh? Won't talk to anyone else. Says it's urgent.'

Tudor licked his lips. 'Is it about the Bloodsmith?'

A shrug. 'Like I say: he won't talk to anyone else.'

'I see . . .' Tudor's smile kicked back in again. 'Maybe our luck's about to turn after all?'

Or maybe it was about to get a whole lot worse?