

**THE
KILLING
LESSONS**

SAUL BLACK



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ONE

The instant Rowena Cooper stepped out of her warm, cookie-scented kitchen and saw the two men standing in her back hallway, snow melting from the rims of their boots, she knew exactly what this was: her own fault. Years of not locking doors and windows, of leaving the keys in the ignition, of not thinking anything like this was ever going to happen, years of feeling safe – it had all been a lie she'd been dumb enough to tell herself. Worse, a lie she'd been dumb enough to believe. Your whole life could turn out to be nothing but you waiting to meet your own giant stupidity. Because here she was, a mile from the nearest neighbour and three miles from town (Ellinson, Colorado, pop. 697), with a thirteen-year-old son upstairs and a ten-year-old daughter on the front porch and two men standing in her back hallway, one of them holding a shotgun, the other a long blade which even in the sheer drop of this moment made her think *machete*, though this was the first time she'd ever seen one outside the movies. The open door behind them showed heavy snow still hurrying down in the late afternoon, pretty against the dark curve of the forest. Christmas was five days away.

She had an overwhelming sense of the reality of her children. Josh lying on his unmade bed with his headphones on. Nell in her red North Face jacket standing watching the snow, dreamily working her way through the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup she'd negotiated not ten

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minutes ago. It was as if there were an invisible nerve running from each of them to her, to her navel, her womb, her soul. This morning Nell had said: That guy Steven Tyler looks like a baboon. She came out with these pronouncements, apropos of nothing. Later, after breakfast, Rowena had overheard Josh say to Nell: Hey, see that? That's your brain. 'That', Rowena had known, would be something like a cornflake or a booger. It was an ongoing competition between the two of them, to find small or unpleasant things and claim they were each other's brains. She thought what a great gift to her it was that her children not only loved but cagily liked each other. She thought how full of great gifts her life was – while her body emptied and the space around her rushed her skin like a swarm of flies and she felt her dry mouth open, the scream coming...

don't scream ...

if Josh keeps quiet and Nell stays...

maybe just rape oh God...

whatever they...

the rifle...

The rifle was locked in the cupboard under the stairs and the key was on the bunch in her purse and her purse was on the bedroom floor and the bedroom floor was a long, long way away.

All you have to do is get through this. Whatever it takes to—

But the larger of the men took three paces forward and in what felt to Rowena like slow motion (she had time to smell stale sweat and wet leather and unwashed hair, to see the small dark eyes and big head, the pores around his nose) raised the butt of the shotgun and smashed it into her face.

Josh Cooper wasn't lying on his bed but he did have his headphones on. He was sitting at his desk with the Squier Strat (used, eBay, \$225, he'd had to put in the \$50 his grandma had sent for his birthday three months back to swing it with his mom) plugged into its practice amp, labouring through a YouTube tutorial – *How to Play Led*

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Zeppelin's 'The Rain Song' – while trying not to think about the porno clip he'd seen at Mike Wainwright's house three days ago, in which two women – an older redhead with green eyeshadow and a young blonde girl who looked like Sarah Michelle Gellar – mechanically licked each other's private parts. Girl-girl sixty-nine, Mike had said, crisply. In a minute they go ass-to-ass. Josh hadn't a clue what 'ass-to-ass' could possibly mean, but he knew, with thudding shame, that whatever it was he wanted to see it. Mike Wainwright was a year older and knew everything about sex, and his parents were so vague and flaky they hadn't got around to putting a parental control on his PC. Unlike Josh's own mom, who'd set one up as a condition of him even *having* a PC.

The memory of the two women had made him hard. Which was exactly what the guitar tutorial had been supposed to avoid. He didn't want to have to jerk off. The feeling he got afterwards depressed him. A heaviness and boredom in his hands and face that put him in a lousy mood and made him snap at Nell and his mom.

He forced himself back to 'The Rain Song'. The track had baffled him, until the Internet told him it wasn't played in standard tuning. Once he'd retuned (D-G-C-G-C-D) the whole thing had opened out to him. There were a couple of tricky bastard reaches between chords in the intro, but that was just practice. In another week, he'd have it nailed.

Nell Cooper wasn't on the porch. She was at the edge of the forest in deep snow watching a mule deer not twenty feet away. An adult female. Those big black eyes and the long lashes that looked fake. Twenty feet was about as close as you could get. Nell had been feeding this one for a couple of weeks, tossing it saved apple cores and handfuls of nuts and raisins sneaked from her mom's baking cupboard. It knew her. She hadn't named it. She didn't talk to it. She preferred these quiet intense encounters.

She took her gloves off and went into her pocket for a half-eaten apple. Snowlight winked on the bracelet her mother had given her

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when she'd turned ten in May. A silver chain with a thin golden hare, running, in profile. It had been her great-grandmother's, then her grandmother's, then her mother's, now hers. Rowena's distant family on her maternal side had come out of Romania. Ancestral lore said there had been a whiff of witchcraft, far back, and that the hare was a charm for safe travel. Nell had always loved it. One of her earliest memories was of turning it on her mother's wrist, sunlight glinting. The hare had a faraway life of its own, though its eye was nothing more than an almond-shaped hole in the gold. Nell hadn't been expecting it, but on the evening of her birthday, long after the other gifts had been unwrapped, her mom had come into her room and fastened it around her left wrist. You're old enough, now, she'd said. I've had the chain shortened. Wear it on your left so it won't get in the way when you're drawing. And not for school, OK? I don't want you to lose it. Keep it for weekends and holidays. It had surprised Nell with a stab of love and sadness, her mother saying 'you're old enough'. It had made her *mother* seem old. And alone. It had, for both of them, brought Nell's father's absence back, sharply. The moment had filled Nell with tenderness for her mother, whom she realised with a terrible understanding had to do all the ordinary things – drive her and Josh to school, shop, cook dinner – with a sort of lonely bravery, because Nell's father was gone.

It made her sad now, to think of it. She resolved to be more help around the house. She would try her best to do things without being asked.

The doe took a few dainty steps, nosed the spot where Nell's apple core had landed – then lifted its head, suddenly alert, the too-big ears (they were *called* mule deer because of the ears) twitching with a whirr like a bird's wing. Whatever the animal had heard, Nell hadn't. To her the forest remained a big, soft, silent presence. (A neutral presence. Some things were on your side, some things were against you, some things were neither. The word is *neutral*, Josh had told her. And in any case you're wrong: things are just things.

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They don't have feelings. They don't even know you exist. Josh had started coming out with this stuff, lately, though Nell didn't for one minute believe he really meant it. Part of him was going away from her. Or rather he was forcing a part of himself to go away from her. Her mom had said: Just be patient with him, honey. It's a puberty thing. Another few years, you'll probably be worse than him.) The doe was tense, listening for something. Nell wondered if it was Old Mystery Guy from the cabin across the ravine.

Old Mystery Guy's name, town gossip had revealed, was Angelo Greer. He'd shown up a week ago and moved into the derelict place over the bridge, a mile east of the Coopers'. There had been an argument with Sheriff Hurley, who'd said he didn't care if the cabin *was* legally Mr Greer's (he'd inherited it years ago when his father died), there was no way he was taking a vehicle over the bridge. The bridge wasn't safe. The bridge had been closed, in fact, for more than two years. Not a priority repair, since the cabin was the only residence for twenty miles on that side of the ravine, and had been deserted for so long. Traffic crossing the Loop River used the highway bridge further south, to connect with the 40. In the end, Mr Greer had driven his car to the west side of the bridge and lugged his supplies across from there on foot. He shouldn't be doing *that*, either, Sheriff Hurley had said, but it had gone no further. Nell hadn't seen Mr Greer. She and Josh had been at school when he'd driven out past their house, but it couldn't be much longer before he'd have to go back into town. According to her mom there wasn't even a phone at the cabin. When Sadie Pinker had stopped by last week, Nell had overheard her say: What the hell is he *doing* out there? To which Rowena had replied: Christ knows. He walks with a stick. I don't know how he's going to manage. Maybe he's out there looking for God.

Nell checked her pockets but all the nuts and raisins were gone. The doe sprang away.

A gunshot exploded in the house.

TWO

Nell ran.

Telling herself it wasn't a gunshot.

Knowing it was.

The ground was a cracked ice floe in a fast current moving against her. Her face was overfull, her hands crammed with blood. There was a busyness to the air, as if it were filled with whispering particles. Details were fresh and urgent: the soft crunch of the snow; the kitchen's smell of just-baked cookies; a complicated knot in the oak floor's grain; the deep maroon of Josh's Converse sneakers by the living room door, light coming through the lace holes.

Her mother lay on her side at the bottom of the stairs. Blood pooled around her, jewel dark, with a soft sheen. Her skirt was off and her panties were looped around her left ankle. Her hair was wrong. Her eyes were open.

Nell felt herself swollen and floating. This was a dream she could will herself out of. Kicking up from underwater you held your breath through the heaviness until you hit the thin promise of the surface, then sweet air. But she was kicking and kicking and there was no surface, nothing to wake to. Just the understanding that the world had been planning this her whole life, and everything else had been a trick to distract her. The house, which had always been her friend, was helpless. The house couldn't do anything but watch, in aching shock.

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Her mother's bare legs bicycled slowly in the blood. Nell wanted to cover them. It was terrible, the pale flesh of her mother's buttocks and the little scribble of varicose veins on her left thigh uncovered like that, in the front hall. Her mouth went *Mommy... Mommy... Mommy...* but no sound came, just rough breath, a solid thing too big for her throat. Her mother blinked. Moved her hand through the blood and raised her finger to her lips. *Shshsh*. The gesture left a vertical red daub, like a geisha's lipstick. Nell staggered to her and dropped to her knees.

'Mommy!'

'Run,' her mother whispered. 'They're still here.'

Her mother's eyes fluttered closed again. It reminded Nell of all the times they'd given each other butterfly kisses, eyelashes against cheek.

'Mommy!'

Her mother's eyes opened.

'Run to Sadie's. I'm going to be all right but you have to run.'

There was a sound of furniture moving upstairs.

'Now!' her mother gasped. She sounded furious. 'Go now! Quick!'

Something moved much closer. In the living room.

Her mother gripped her by the wrist and spat: 'You run right now, Nell. I'm not kidding. Do it or I'm going to be angry. Go. Now!'

To Nell, backing away from her mother, it was as if a skin that joined the two of them was tearing. She kept stopping. There was a fierce emptiness in her ankles and knees and wrists. She couldn't swallow. But the further away she got, the more vigorously her mother nodded, *yes, yes, keep going, baby, keep going*.

She made it all the way to the open back door before the man stepped out of the living room.

THREE

He had coppery hair in greasy curls that hung all the way down to his thinly bearded jaw. Pale blue eyes that made Nell think of archery targets. His face was moist and his dirty-fingernailed hands looked as if they'd thawed too fast. Dark oily jeans and a black puffa jacket with a rip in the breast through which the soft grey lining showed. His feet would stink, Nell thought. He looked tense and thrilled.

'Hey, cunt,' he said to Rowena, smiling. 'How're you holding up?' Then he turned and saw Nell.

The moment lasted a long time.

When Nell moved, she thought of the way the doe had sprung away into the forest. Its head had jerked to the right as if it had been yanked on an invisible rein, then it had twisted and flung itself as if the rest of its body was a fraction slower and had to catch up. It was the way she felt, turning and running, as if her will were a little maddening distance ahead of her, straining to haul her body into sync.

The space around her was heavy, something she had to wade through. At the beach once on vacation in Delaware she'd been standing on tiptoe in the ocean, the bottle-green water up to her chin, and Josh had said, Oh my God, Nell, shark! Right behind you! Hurry! And though she'd been certain – or almost certain – he was

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kidding, there was the agony of the water's weight, soft and sly and fighting her, slowing her, in cahoots with the shark.

Josh.

Mom.

I'm going to be all right but you have to run.

I'm going to be.

All right.

'All right' meant later, tomorrow, Christmas, days and weeks and years, breakfast in the untidy kitchen, the smell of toast and coffee, TV in the evening, drives into town, Sadie coming over, the scent of her mother's hand cream, conversations like the ones they'd been having lately when they talked woman-to-woman, somehow—

Something crashed behind her. She looked back into the house.

The red-haired man was picking himself up from the hallway floor, laughing, saying: 'What the fuck, bitch?' Then shaking his left leg to dislodge Rowena's hand from his ankle. Something in Nell knew it was the last of her mother's strength. It was the last of *her* strength. And yet out of her exhaustion an impulse pushed her and her legs moved, barely touching the packed snow she and Josh had beaten down on their walks to the forest.

She was running.

It seemed impossible, she was so empty. The lightest breeze would lift her into the air like a fall leaf.

But she was running. She had twenty yards on him.

Cunt.

The word was dark and thick with dirt. She'd heard it maybe twice before in her life, she couldn't remember where.

How're you holding up? His smile when he'd asked that meant nothing you could say would stop him doing what he was doing. It would just make him do it more.

She wanted to go back to her mother. She could stop, turn, say to the man: I don't care what happens, just let me cover my mom's legs and put my arms around her. That's all I want. Then you can

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kill me. The longing to stop was so powerful. The way her mother's eyelids had closed and opened, as if it were a difficult thing she had to concentrate on, very carefully. It meant... It meant...

The swish of his arms against the puffa jacket, the thud and squeak of his boots in the snow. He was very close behind her. The twenty yards had been eaten up. How stupid to think she could outrun him. The long legs and grown-up strength. For the first time she thought: *You'll never see your mother again. Or Josh.* Her own voice repeated this in her head, *you'll never see your mother again*, mixed with the man's *hey, cunt*, and her mother saying, *Yes but how much do you love me ...?*

She knew she shouldn't look back but she couldn't help it.

He was almost within touching distance, red hands reaching for her. In the glimpse she saw his mouth open in the coppery beard, small teeth tobacco-stained, the pale blue eyes like a goat's, his sharp nose with long, raw nostrils. He looked as if he were thinking about something else. Not her. He looked worried.

The glance back cost her. She stumbled, felt the ground snag the toe of her left boot, threw her hands out in front of her for the fall.

His fingertips swiped the hood of her jacket.

But he'd overreached.

She stayed – just – on her empty legs, and he went down hard behind her with a grunt and a barked '*Fuck.*'

Her mother's eyes saying *go on, baby, go on.*

Never again. The golden hare's faraway life suddenly close to her own.

Things are just things. They don't have feelings. They don't even know you exist.

Nell could hear herself sobbing. There was a bloom of warmth in her pants and she realised she'd wet herself.

But she was at the tree line, and the afternoon light was almost gone.

FOUR

He was still coming. She could hear the pines' soft crash as he went past them. The forest wasn't in shock, as the house had been. It had mattered to the house, but in here it barely registered. The smell of old wood and undisturbed snow had always made her think of Narnia, the wardrobe that led to the magical winter kingdom. It made her think of it now, in spite of everything. Her mind was all these useless thoughts, flitting around the image of her mother's face and the way she'd blinked so slowly and there was a look in her eyes Nell had never seen before, an admission that there was something she couldn't do, that there was something she couldn't fix.

Your jacket's red, fig-brain, she imagined Josh saying. *Red. Don't make it easy for him.*

She crouched behind a Douglas fir and took it off. Black woollen sweater underneath. The cold grabbed her with vicious delight. The jacket lining was navy blue. The smart thing – the Josh thing – would be to turn it inside out and wear it that way. She started – but her hands were faint, distant things to which she'd lost her connection. The hare's heart was hers, now, beating into her pulse.

She heard him say, 'Jesus fucking Christ.'

Too close. Get further away then put it back on.

She ran again. It had got darker. Somewhere under the snow was the off-road trail, but she had no idea if she was on it. The

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self-absorbed trees gave no clue. And there were her footprints. No matter where she ran he'd know. At least until the last of the light went. How much longer? Minutes. She told herself she only had to keep going for a few minutes.

'Come here, you little shit,' his voice said. She couldn't tell where he was. The firs and the snow packed all the sounds close, like in Megan's dad's recording studio. Should she climb up? (She could climb anything. Nell, honey, I wish you'd stop climbing things, her mother had said. Nell had said: I won't fall. To which her mother had replied: I'm not worried you'll fall. I'm worried you've got monkey genes.) *Should* she climb up? No, the footprints would stop and he'd know: *Here I am! Up here!* She stumbled forward. Found firmer snow. Her legs buckled. Her palms stung when she hit the ground. She got up again. Ran.

The land sloped, suddenly. Here and there black rock broke the snow. She was forced downhill. The drifts went sometimes above her knees. Her muscles burned. It seemed a long time since she'd heard him. She'd lost all sense of direction. Breathing scored her lungs. She struggled back into her jacket. It was dark enough now for the red not to matter.

A branch snapped. She looked up.

It was him.

Thirty feet above her and to her left. He'd seen her.

'Stay there!' he spat. 'Stop fucking running. Jesus, you little—'

Something rolled under his foot and he fell. The slope pitched him towards her. He couldn't stop himself.

It seemed to Nell that she'd only turned and taken three pointless steps when she heard him cry out. But this time she didn't look back. All she knew was the tearing of her muscles and the burn of every breath. Stones turned her ankles. Branches stung her exposed hands and face. Something scratched her eye, a mean little detail in the blur. The only certainty was that any second his hands would be on her. Any second. Any second.

FIVE

Upstairs in the house Xander King watched the boy on the bedroom floor die then sat down at the desk's little swivel chair. The world had come alive, the way it did, but it wasn't right. This had been a mistake, and it was Paulie's fault. Paulie was getting on his nerves. Paulie was going to fuck everything up. It was ridiculous, really, that he'd let Paulie stick around so long. Paulie was going to have to go.

It was a relief to Xander to realise this, to know it for certain, despite the inconvenience, the work involved, the distraction. Anything you knew for certain was a relief.

The cool smell of new paint played around him, from the empty room across the hall. (He'd done a dreamy sweep of the upper floor: the woman's bedroom with its odours of clean linen and cosmetics; another filled with neatly boxed stuff – vinyl records, Manila files, a sewing machine; a bathroom with the fading light on its porcelain and tiles – and the half-painted fifth room, small, with a wardrobe and a chest of drawers draped in painters' tarps. A roller and tray, brushes in a jar of turpentine, a stepladder. It had reminded him of Mama Jean, up *her* stepladder in the lounge at the old house, wearing her sour-smelling man's overalls, her face flecked with white emulsion.)

The boy's TV was on, with the sound down. *The Big Bang Theory*. Another show like *Friends*, with too many bright colours. Xander found the remote on the desk and flicked through the channels, hoping

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to find *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Or *Real Housewives of New York*. Or *Real Housewives of Orange County*. There were a lot of shows he was drawn to. *The Millionaire Matchmaker*. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. *America's Next Top Model*. *The Apprentice*. But no luck. His body was rich. He teased himself a little, looking at the dead kid's blown-open guts then looking away, feeling the richness come and go in his limbs, as if it were a dial in himself he could turn up and down at will.

The kid's guitar had fallen face down on the rug. The rug was Native American style. Which reminded Xander of a fact he knew: white settlers had given the Indians blankets infected with diseases in the hope that they'd all get sick and die. There were certain facts he was familiar with. Certain facts that made sense in the way that so much else didn't. So much else not only didn't make sense but exhausted him. He was constantly struggling with exhaustion.

Remembering the disease-blankets made his beard itch. A beard. He hadn't shaved for four days. His routines had been suffering. The battery shaver was dead. The good thing about the battery shaver was that you could do it without a mirror.

He thought about the woman downstairs. He would go down to her soon, but for now it was very good just to sit and enjoy the richness. It was a wonderful thing to know he could go down to her any time he liked. It was a wonderful thing to know she wasn't going anywhere. He could go anywhere and do anything, but everything and anything she wanted to do depended on him. His face and hands had the plump warmth that was both impatience and all the time in the world.

But still, it wasn't right. Too many things, recently, hadn't been right. There was a way of doing what he needed to do, and lately he'd been losing sight of it. The cunt in Reno, for example. That had been Paulie's fault too. Paulie definitely had to go.

SIX

The world stopped and Nell flew through it. A non-silence like when you put your head underwater in the bath, the loud private quiet of the inside of your own body. She ran through the darkness and with every step knew she couldn't take another step. It was as if his hands were on her and yet she was still moving. How could she still be moving if he had her? Perhaps he'd lifted her off her feet and she was just pedalling air. Like her mother's bare legs kicking slowly in the blood. Her mother's blood. Leaving her. Spreading on the floor. So much blood. When blood came out it didn't go back in. Never again. You'll never see...

The trees ended. A deeper cold from the ravine came up, sheer air and the sound of the rushing river far below. The snow was coming down faster now, at a wind-driven angle. The bridge was fifty feet to her left. Which meant she was half a mile from home, going the wrong way. But she couldn't turn back on herself. When she thought of turning back on herself the only image she got was of him stepping out from behind a tree and the warm thud of her running straight into his body, his arms coming quick around her. *Gotcha*. She could hear him saying that.

She ran to the bridge. There was, incredibly, a parked car a few feet away from it.

Whose car? Empty?

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She stopped. *His* car? With someone else in it?

She peered through the falling snow.

There was no one in the car. Could she hide under it? No. Stupid. First place he'd look. People nearby?

She scanned the ravine's edge. No one.

There was no time. Move.

She ran to the bridge head.

A red sign with white lettering: BRIDGE CLOSED DANGER DO NOT CROSS

Rusted metal struts driven into the walls of the ravine. Wooden sleepers she remembered wobbling the few times her mom had driven them across in the Jeep. A mile to the west, she knew, the ravine narrowed to barely twenty feet before flaring out again. Last year an ice storm had brought a Douglas fir down across the gap. Teenagers proved themselves by crawling over to the other side and back. You had to go there and back. That was the thing. Josh and his friend Mike Wainwright had spent a whole morning working up the courage. Daring each other. Double daring. In the end neither of them had done it. Two hundred feet. The ravine's dark air ready. The river waiting.

She edged around the sign. Her wet jeans were icy between her legs. The creases bit her skin. Her feet felt bruised. The snow here was above her knees. How far to the other side? In the Jeep it took seconds. She seemed to be wading for ever. There were invisible weights on her thighs.

Halfway across she had to stop and rest. She wanted to lie down. She could barely see an arm's length in the slanting snow. The distance between her and her mother and Josh hurt her insides. She kept imagining it being morning, the grey daylight and the warmth of the kitchen, her mom turning to her as she walked in and saying, Nell, where've you *been*? I've been out of my *mind*...

She forced herself to move. Three steps. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. The end of the bridge. The back of a metal sign, identical, she supposed,

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to the one at the other end. A broken spool of barbed wire hung between the railings and dangled into the emptiness of the ravine.

‘Goddamn you,’ the man’s voice said. It sounded as if he were inches behind her. She turned. He was at the BRIDGE CLOSED sign, struggling to squeeze past it. It seemed impossible that she’d be able to get her legs to move.

She staggered forward. Two more steps. Three. She was almost there. Something made her stop.

Apart from the whisper of the racing snow and the intimate din of her own breathing there was nothing to hear. But it was as if she’d heard something.

The actual sound, when it came, wiped everything from her mind.

And when the world fell from under her a small part of herself felt a strange relief.

This part of her – her soul, maybe – flew up out of the fall like a spark with the thought that at least it was over, at least wherever her mom had gone she would go too. She believed in heaven, vaguely. Where good people went when they died. Some place where you could walk on the clouds and there were white stairways and gardens and God – although she always imagined she’d rather just know he was around than actually meet him. She’d sometimes wondered if she was a good person, but now that it came to it, she wasn’t afraid.

Far away was the sound of grinding, metal against rock.

All around her the gloom and the snow somersaulting, slowly.

Then something rushed up at deafening speed to strike her face.

SEVEN

It was still dark when Nell opened her eyes, though she had no idea how long she'd been out. Her first confused thought was that she was in bed, and that the comforter was wet and freezing. Then her vision cleared. Not the comforter. Snow. Three or four inches on her. It was still snowing.

As if it had been waiting for her to realise this, cold rushed her, seized every molecule and said: *You are freezing. You are freezing to death.*

She pushed herself up onto her elbow. Too fast. The world spun. The sky's soft chasm and the looming wall of the ravine churned like clothes in a tumble dryer. She rolled onto her side and vomited, and for what felt like a long time afterwards just lay there, though her body not only shivered but occasionally jerked, as if someone were jabbing her with a cattle prod. Through the cold she was aware of two pains: one in her right foot, one in her skull. They throbbed together, in time with her pulse. They were bad, but she knew they weren't as bad as they soon would be. It was as if they were telling her this, with glee, that they were just getting started.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. *I'll never see my mother again.* It brought back the time she was very small and got separated from her mother in a department store. Suddenly all the unknown adults and intimidating heights, the panic, the full horror of herself in the

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world alone. The world had been hiding how terrifying it was. It drew back again half a minute later, when Rowena found her, but there was no forgetting it. And now here it was again.

Nell pushed herself back up onto her elbow and looked down. She was lying on a narrow shelf that stuck out from the ravine about fifteen feet from the top. If she'd rolled another eight inches she'd have gone, two hundred feet down to the dark green river and its scattered rocks. On the opposite side, struts mangled, the bridge hung, ridiculously, from one of its huge rivets.

The golden hare bracelet had snapped its chain. It lay in the snow next to her, in flecks of blood. *You're old enough, now.* The hare marked the edge of her fall. Another few inches and she'd be dead. She imagined it had a certain number of times it could save you. This was one. She wondered how many. Very carefully, she closed her fingers around it. It seemed to take a long time to work it into her jacket pocket. Safe travel.

She got to her knees. The pain in her foot turned up its volume. She clamped her teeth together. Her head went big and solid and hot, then cold and fragile. Her scalp shrank. She couldn't stop the shivering. She could feel the sheer drop behind her like a weight pulling at her back.

I wish you'd stop climbing everything. I'm worried you've got monkey genes. Nell had thought monkey *jeans* (chimps in little Levi's) until Josh, rolling his eyes, had explained. She hadn't really grasped it even then.

The ravine wall was frozen black rock, veined white where the snow held. Not quite vertical. Not *quite* vertical, but still.

I'm going to be all right but you have to run.

She reached up for the nearest handhold. Her fingers were numb. Her face flooded with heat. And when she tried to stand the pain in her foot screamed.

EIGHT

Paulie Stokes was in agony. His fall had brought him with the full force of his body's weight up against what had turned out to be a two-foot tree stump half buried in the snow. His bent left knee had hit it hard, and now, back within sight of the house, the pain was so bad he was beginning to think it must be broken.

He'd thought she was dead.

He'd stood there for maybe fifteen minutes. Until her head had lifted. He'd watched her body get its bearings. He'd watched the little bitch climb. *Climb*, Jesus.

Xander couldn't know.

Xander could not and must not know.

Which Paulie knew was an insane decision to have made – but he'd made it. There were a lot of decisions he made this way, with the sense that the thing they were intended to avoid couldn't be avoided. He did this with a mix of lightness and terror and fascination. He lived a light, terrified, fascinated life slightly to one side of Xander. But the longer he hung around Xander the smaller and less reliable that life became. So now in a kind of looped dream he told himself Xander mustn't know about the girl and Xander would find out and Xander mustn't know and it was only a matter of time before Xander found out and he wouldn't tell him and then the dream-loop dissolved like a skyrocket's trail in the night sky and

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he took a few more excruciating steps with no room for anything but the forked lightning of his shattered knee until in spite of that the dream-loop started again and Xander mustn't know and Xander was guaranteed to find out and he wouldn't tell him and it would be all right and it wouldn't.

'Where the fuck have you been?' Xander said to him, as he limped into the living room. 'What's wrong with you?'

The wooden blinds were down and two table lamps were on. They gave a gentle buttery light. The room had a friendliness to it, from the corduroy couches to the scattered kids' DVDs and the thick hearthrug with its pattern of squares and rectangles in different shades of brown. The woman was lying on the floor on her back where Xander had dragged her. Her pale blue panties lay nearby, stained with blood. She was still alive. Her mouth was moving but there was no sound. The thought of what would become of him if Xander left him reared up in Paulie, a feeling like the one he got in the dream of the tidal wave he used to have as a kid, where he was standing on a bright boardwalk eating an ice cream with his back to the ocean, and the sky darkened, and when he turned there was a thousand-foot wall of black water coming towards him, flecked with sharks and shipwrecks. At the same time the fact of the woman's helplessness, the look of ebbd strength in her bare limbs, filled him with a kind of nourishment, as if fabulous proteins had been rushed into him.

'I thought I saw someone out there,' he said. 'But it was a deer. Hurt my goddamned leg. Need to strap it up or something.'

'A deer?'

Paulie had actually seen a deer on his stumble back through the trees.

'You shouldn't have left her,' Xander said.

'She wasn't going anywhere.'

'You don't know that. This is your problem: you don't think. Not going anywhere? Women lift fucking trucks when their kids are trapped underneath. You don't *think*. I've told you.'

SAUL BLACK

‘OK, OK. Fuck, man, how’d it be if there *had* been someone? You’d be thanking me.’ Paulie had to turn away as he said this. Xander looked at you and your lies crumbled. His hands were wet. The pain in his knee was a blessing, since it kept short-circuiting everything else.

‘Go and strap your leg,’ Xander said. ‘Don’t come back in here till I tell you. And for Christ’s sake shut the back door, will you?’

When Paulie had hobbled out Xander moved to stand over the woman on the floor. The feeling of wrongness, of not having what he needed to do this properly, was still with him, but it was made negligible by the pounding richness of his body and the bristling aliveness of the world. Every detail of the room, whether it liked it or not, said that whatever this woman’s life had been up until now, he had all of it in his hands. His controlled impatience was a delight to him. It was like holding back a horse he knew would win every time, no matter the competition. There was a sort of hilarity to it, the certainty of power, the certainty of victory. There was a moment of balance, between holding it back and letting it go. You had to wait for that moment and make it last as long as possible, because the surrender to it was the sweetest thing of all, a sweetness that went through your every cell so that all your movements were perfect, every bit of you was perfect, from your fingerprints to your eyelashes, and so much of the exhaustion simply fell away like a rotten harness and you were free.

‘What?’ he said to the woman, getting down on his knees and putting his ear next to her mouth. ‘What are you saying?’

NINE

Rowena Cooper had been in and out of consciousness. She remembered waking at the bottom of the stairs to find herself soaked and heavy. A terrible delayed understanding that she was soaked and heavy with her own blood. The gun's butt had hit her like a meteor. Those last fragments of thought: that they'd find Josh; that if only Nell heard and ran; that Nell *wouldn't* run, that she'd come in, see, scream – and they'd have her, too.

Then blackness.

She hadn't heard the gunshot. She didn't know.

But when she'd surfaced again there was a frank silence upstairs. A dead intelligence had replaced her son.

Then Nell, close, smelling of snow and the forest, the little face that was like a brand on Rowena's heart. The appalling energy it had cost her to get Nell to run. *Run*. Saying she'd be angry if she didn't and seeing in her daughter's eyes that the child knew the anger was a sham to hide something much worse. It was an understanding between them. Her daughter's strength in that moment had fractured Rowena with love and pride.

The last image, after the red-haired guy had picked himself up off the floor, was of him going after her, towards the dark line of the forest. *Go on, baby, keep going. Hide, hide in the good trees.*

She'd sunk into nothingness again, and when she returned was

being dragged by her ankles down the hallway and through the living room doorway. The liverish stink of her blood mixed with the Christmas tree's smell and the waxy odour of gift wrap. She was cold and thirsty. (She thought what a long time it had been since she'd lain on the floor. When you were a kid the floor was part of your perspective. You forgot the view from down here, the skirting boards and secret spaces under the couch with their lost items and fluff.) She could see the fireplace Josh had set ready for lighting earlier that day. Only ever lit at Christmas. It was one of the rituals he'd taken over a few years back, with shy masculinity. The first time he'd done it without asking, Rowena had walked into the empty room and seen it and stood there swallowing back tears. Her husband, Peter, had died in a car accident when Nell was only four years old, Josh seven. All the ways in which she'd worried she wasn't enough for her children. And then her son's quiet act of compensation. She'd felt such an access of tenderness and loss.

The reality of death came to her through the cold and the thirst. The immense sadness of the fact. Her time going like the last grains of sand sucked through the hourglass's cinched middle. Going. Going. Images from her past detonated: childhood in Denver; the little house's parquet flooring and weedy yard; her father reading *The Hobbit* to her when she was ill; the heady first weeks at college in Austin; the certainty when she'd met Peter, the happy sensual pigs they'd made of themselves that first year, love and pleasure like a ridiculous fortune they'd inherited; the thrill of telling him she was pregnant and the astonishing casual knowledge that he wanted it as much as she did, that this was really their life, shaping itself; Josh being born, Nell, the messy, ordinary, unappreciated gifts of having a family. Then the accident, the shredded life, the incremental acceptance. The dull practicality of the insurance payout and the move back to Colorado. Last house on the road. A peaceful corner to raise the kids and heal your wounds.

She felt the sprawling idea of the future – Josh and Nell growing up, college and love affairs and houses and children, phone calls and

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the ache of their absence and the peace of putting her arms around them when they came home, the things she still wanted (maybe a man again; her body had been telling her, lately, saying enough was enough, she was still only forty-one) and through all of that the imagined relationship with the taken-for-granted physical world, of sunlight and red leaves on a forest floor and the breathtaking first whiff of the ocean – she felt all of this dissolving into blankness, pointlessness, a bereavement she couldn't accommodate. She had an odd, flimsy image of Nell's half-painted bedroom. Nell had been sleeping with her these last nights while the redecoration inched forward. It would never be finished now. It had been sweet being close to her daughter through the nights. She wanted to say goodbye to her children. Above everything else she wanted to see and smell and hear and hold them one last time. And all the while the darkness came and went, and very vaguely a confusion of wondering if there was anything on the other side and would she, after all the horror of grief, see Peter again?

'What?' the man said, his face close to hers. 'What are you saying?'

But a blood bubble formed and burst between her lips. She saw the ceiling's central light, the gold tinsel sparkling, felt the cold turning to warmth as the image formed of Nell running through the shadows in the snow.

TEN

Thirty-eight-year-old San Francisco homicide detective Valerie Hart knew she'd made a mistake. The latest in a sequence of mistakes that had started with her smiling at the guy – Callum – in the softly lit cocktail bar less than two hours earlier. He'd smiled back, but with a look of self-congratulatory entitlement she'd known wouldn't go anywhere good.

Things hadn't improved during their brief conversation. He worked 'in banking, but let's not talk about that, it's a turn-off', nor in the cab, when he'd ignored a call from what they both knew was another woman, nor when he'd closed the apartment door behind them, watched her take a few paces into the room, then said: 'Jesus, your ass is an argument-winner.' Valerie knew he'd said it countless times before. And in her case didn't mean it. She knew exactly what she was in his eyes: a one-night downgrade. An older woman who wouldn't object to whatever he wanted to do in the sack because she was just grateful to *be* in the sack.

The apartment only confirmed the mistake. It was in the Ashton complex by Candlestick Park with a floor-to-ceiling view of the Bay. Valerie knew the place. Two bedrooms would cost you the better part of four million dollars. Unsurprisingly, the decor – some hired designer's idea of minimalism (glass and steel) plus fun (cowhide rug) – said: rich asshole lives here.

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And here she was. With only herself to blame.

‘Stop,’ she said, when he took his tongue out of her mouth for a breath.

They were on the bed and he was lying on top of her. Her blouse was open, and he’d pulled her bra cups down awkwardly below her breasts. He lowered his head, took her left nipple in his mouth, flicked his tongue over it. Nipped it.

‘Stop,’ Valerie said.

He ignored her.

And this is one of the ways this happens, Valerie thought. *One of the countless ways.*

‘Stop,’ she said a third time, louder.

‘Fuck,’ he said. ‘What? What is it?’ No disguising the impatience. Which would become annoyance. Which would become anger.

His left hand was behind her head, gripping her neck. His right was in the open V of her unzipped pants, fingers exploring her through her panties. Jesus Christ, your Honour, she was *wet*. I mean, come *on*.

She *was* wet. Residually. There had been enough of her that had wanted this when they’d started. Not because she’d had any illusions about him. In fact precisely because she hadn’t had any illusions about him. These days – since Blasko – if she went to bed with a man it had to be one in whom she had no interest beyond physical desire. These days – since she’d killed love – it had to be someone she didn’t like.

But there wasn’t enough of her that wanted it now. Now the bulk of her just felt sad. Although she knew very well that sadness wasn’t going to be any use here.

She put her hand on his chest and pushed, not hard, just a civilised statement. ‘You need to get off me,’ she said.

‘Well you’re half right,’ he said. ‘I need to get *off*.’ His hand pressed harder between her legs. ‘It’s OK if you want to play,’ he said, tightening his hold on the back of her neck. ‘Just don’t draw blood.’

‘That’s not what this is,’ she said, pushing a second time. ‘Get off me.’

‘That’s not what your pussy’s telling me,’ he said.

Guile or force. Those were her options. Certainly not *argument*. He weighed, she guessed, around 170, and vanity sent him to the gym three or four times a week. It was a long, *long* time since Academy training, and she'd been slack on the workouts for months, but the thought of trying to trick her way out from under him exhausted her. Hey, I've got some coke in my purse. Let's do a couple of lines. He wouldn't believe her. He was alert to her change of heart. In the Academy, every session of 'Practical Police Skills' was conducted to the sound of the instructor's mantra: You will survive. You will survive. You *will* survive.

*Leah's eye out fork balloon the mess between Shyla's legs Yun-seo's body flecks of soil he started alone but shallow grave river stop—
Stop. Stop.*

Her purse was fifteen feet away, where she'd left it on the arm of the bedroom's cream leather couch.

Third option: guile *and* force.

She softened underneath him. She'd had a cold for two weeks. She was aware of her sinuses, throbbing.

'That's better,' he said, pushing himself up on his left hand to get a look at her, while his right hand snuck into the top of her panties. 'That's a good girl.'

She eased her right knee under his, got a purchase with her heel (she still had her shoes on) – then punched him as hard as she could in the side of his throat.

He was so shocked by the pain she barely needed the full force of her right leg to flip him, but she was past such calculations. She was off the bed and at her purse in three seconds.

Be careful, the drill instructor had told them all. A punch to the throat can *kill* a scumbag.

This scumbag wasn't dead. He was on his knees on the bed, swallowing, swallowing, swallowing, holding his throat.

'What the fuck?' he gasped, looking at the Glock in her hand. 'What the *fuck*?'

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Valerie was a mix of adrenalin and emptiness. She zipped up her pants and resettled her bra.

‘Christ are you...’ swallow, ‘are you a *cop*?’

Valerie buttoned her blouse. Her coat was on the floor next to the couch. ‘Just shut up and stay there,’ she said, quietly. Her face was hot. She could feel the days’ and weeks’ and months’ exhaustion pressing hard on the adrenalin, waiting for it to give, when it would come crashing in like the ocean through a plate glass window.

‘Listen,’ he said, one hand raised, palm outward, his whole body trying to reinvent itself as the personification of innocence, ‘we were just...’ gulp, ‘I mean I wasn’t...’

‘It’s better for you if you don’t speak,’ Valerie said, getting into her coat. The sound of her own voice disgusted her. Proof that this wasn’t a dream but a real situation she’d put herself in.

When she was ready, she moved a couple of paces nearer the bed, with the gun pointed directly at him.

‘Hey,’ he said, trembling. ‘Hey, Jesus, come on.’ Swallow. ‘I’m sorry. Don’t do anything crazy. I didn’t do anything to you. I didn’t *do* anything to you!’

‘Then what are you sorry for?’

He was shaking his head. Disbelief. How had this happened to him? How could this be happening to him?

There were a lot of things she could say. Laura Flynn, one of her colleagues, had said not long ago: Give every woman a gun and a badge and watch the rape stats fall. What Valerie most wanted to say to the man on the bed was: And this is how *this* happens.

But somehow everything died in her mouth. She just wanted to go home.

Keeping the gun trained on him, she backed out of the bedroom, then turned and walked out of the apartment, closing the door behind her.

ELEVEN

She woke at four thirty a.m., after an hour and thirty-five minutes' dream-infested sleep, to the sound of poetry. By design: some time back she'd started setting the radio alarm to a digital station that read poetry through the night. Poetry didn't make sense. But it gave you things. That was one of a small number of truths she'd discovered. A pitifully small number. Like a bum's last nickels and dimes in a world that required a thousand dollars a day to make it bearable.

'He must become the whole of boredom,' the soft male voice on the radio said. 'Subject to vulgar complaints, like love, among the Just be just, among the Filthy, filthy too. And in his own weak person, if he can, Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.'

Valerie switched it off. *All the wrongs of Man. In his own weak person. Filthy. Among the Just. Be just.* The words shuffled in her head, gave her a few precious seconds before The Case took over: *Refrigeration RV candy apple stuffs objects guts cut out with fish knife what kind of fish knife limited number maybe fisherman too much traffic enforcement footage fork jammed in vagina he knew Katrina had to had to had to otherwise why'd she go with him them not one guy two guys but it started with one guy I don't know how I know this Kansas the mid-point have to call Cartwright again they're not taking it seriously have to have to...*

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Unlike the radio, this couldn't be switched off. The Case was there at her sleeping and there at her waking and there with her through the day. X-rated tinnitus. Tinnitus designed by the Devil. When she was a child her grandfather (the last practising Roman Catholic of the family) had said to her: First the Devil lets you know there are terrible things. Then he tells you which room they're in. Then he invites you in to look. And before you know it you can't find the door to get out. Before you know it you're *one* of the terrible things.

She got up and went to the bathroom.

A positive result is indicated by a blue line. That morning three years ago was with her every morning. As if the bathroom's humble features couldn't forget it. *She* certainly couldn't. That morning she'd sat on the floor wrapped in a soft white bath towel. Waiting.

A pregnancy test detects the presence of a hormone called human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG) in your blood or in your urine. hCG is produced in the placenta shortly after the embryo attaches to the uterine lining and builds up rapidly in your body in the first few days of pregnancy.

The idiom of impersonal biology. *Chorionic gonadotrophin. Placenta. Uterine lining. Embryo.*

As opposed to the personal idiom: Baby. Child. Mother. Father.

Blasko had said to her, once, in the heart of their life together, before the Suzie Fallon case had driven her to wreck it: The best and worst thing about being a cop is that it makes it easier to tell the truth. They'd been in bed at the time, subsiding in the warm wake of a small-hours fuck that had started half-asleep then woken them with dreamily escalating dirty-sweetness. They had these encounters, took them as an entitlement. Afterwards, Valerie liked to drift back into sleep to the sound of his voice. It makes it easier, he'd said, because every day you're surrounded by the pointlessness of lying.

She'd remembered it that morning three years ago, sitting wrapped in the giant towel on her bathroom floor, waiting for the line on the test to turn blue.

Pregnant. 5–6 weeks.

She'd wondered, knees hunched up to her middle, bare shoulders tender, why they didn't make two kinds of home test kit: one for women who were trying to conceive, in which a positive result flashed-up: *Congratulations! You're PREGNANT*; and one for women who were dreading it, in which the same result came with: *Fuck. Sorry. You're PREGNANT*.

But of course she knew the manufacturers had done their research. Neutrality. No expectation. No judgement. Just the facts. *Pregnant. 5–6 weeks.*

The impulse had been to phone Deerholt and tell him she was sick. But the thought of spending the day alone in her apartment had terrified her. Because by that time, only weeks after the Suzie Fallon case and the death of love, she *was* alone.

Instead she'd forced herself up off the floor. Got dressed. Gone to work. Spent the day behaving normally while inside she churned loss and panic and all the damage she'd already done.

That night, lying in a foamless bath up to her throat, she'd told herself: You don't have to decide anything yet. You have some time. You can wait.

So she'd waited. Spent days going through the same wretched circles, dropping off into the same unknowns. Multiple futures shuddered in her, fighting each other. And still she'd waited.

Until the decision had been taken out of her hands.

She ought to have had a nervous breakdown, but she hadn't. Instead, after the Suzie Fallon case, after the death of love, after what had been taken out of her hands, she simply carried on. She wasn't the same. She brought a new seared clarity to her work, a relentless, mechanical energy. She became a better cop. Everyone noticed. No one said anything.

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Three years had gone by, granted. But in imaginal time that morning in the bathroom was only a moment ago. Would always be only a moment ago. Imaginal time had no respect for chronology. Especially the past.

Her cold was worse. Her nostrils were raw and her body ached. The booze had crept up, these weeks, these months, these three years. Her recycling sack yesterday had been half Smirnoff empties. She could do with a drink right now, when the rest of the world was drinking coffee. It was a line of thinking she'd got used to ignoring.

When she was a little girl, she'd hated going to school. In the mornings, her mother used to say: I know you feel like killing yourself, honey, but brush your teeth and you'll feel a little better. And she was right. Washed and dressed, Valerie was always forced to admit, grudgingly, sheepishly, that life was, after all, bearable.

She went to the washbasin and reached for her toothbrush. Her hands were shaking.

Blasko's message was still by the medicine cabinet mirror, where he'd tacked it to the wall three years ago, written in black permanent marker on a clean sheet of legal: *NOT TODAY*.

As in, you can quit being a cop anytime you like. Just not today. It was the only trace of him still in her apartment. Not even a lone sock or a toothbrush or a department issue pencil. And whose fault was that—

Leah's eye was out and she'd swallowed four of her teeth the tyres are Goodyear G647RSS too many too many Lisbeth unicorn crystal lacerations to anus and vagina I can't do this YES TODAY YES TODAY YES TODAY...

Brush your teeth, for Christ's sake. You'll feel better.

Halfway through brushing, she threw up in the washbasin.

TWELVE

Eighty minutes later (eighty minutes divided between standing under the near-scalding jets of her shower, then staring out her apartment window at the Mission's pre-dawn start-up – delivery trucks, joggers, dog-walkers and people still drunk from the night's revels) Valerie sat in the incident room at the station, thinking the thought that had been part of her for so long now she couldn't remember what life had been like without it: that they were no nearer to catching the man, or most likely *men*, who did this than they had been at the discovery of the first body three years ago.

Katrina Mulvaney, thirty-one years old. Educational outreach officer at the San Francisco zoo. First reported missing June 3rd, 2010. Her body had been found three weeks later in a shallow grave a mile east of Route 1, halfway between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. She'd lived in a fifth-floor walk-up in the Castro. Without knowing each other, she and Valerie had practically been neighbours.

Among the photographs Katrina's boyfriend had supplied – the 'before' photographs – there was one Valerie had gone back to, repeatedly. In it, Katrina had obviously not been expecting to be photographed. The boyfriend had probably just gone 'Hey,' and she'd turned. It was what Valerie thought of as an 'outlook' shot. As in, outlook on life. You could see it in people caught like that, unprepared. Katrina's outlook was one of cautious hope. The look said

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she wasn't stupid, she knew the world could fuck you up without warning. But it also said she knew she'd been loved as a child, and that she was still moved by beauty, and that she knew her faults and weaknesses but knew too that she wasn't a bad person. The look said she had not long before realised that she was in love. That was part of the fear still left in her outlook: that the love, somehow, might go wrong.

Love hadn't gone wrong.

What had gone wrong was that someone had abducted, raped, mutilated and murdered her.

Then that person – *persons* – had abducted, raped, mutilated and murdered Sarah Keller, twenty-four years old. Then Angelica Martinez, then Shyla Lee-Johnson, then Yun-seo Hahn, then Leah Halberstam, then Lisbeth Cole. Seven women between the ages of twenty-four and forty. And it had taken the better part of three years for the authorities to realise that what all these women had in common was that the same man – or men – had killed them.

Valerie imagined the millions of astonished TV crime show addicts. Three *years*? Are these *retarded* cops?

If she thought of trying to answer that question she came up against fatigue like a wall of raw earth. The way the shows' crime scenes exploded with evidence. The way the leads always led somewhere. The way the investigative net tightened in a whisk of phone calls and snappy deduction. The way detectives tossed out requests like '*Get me a list of every place that sells roll asphalt and transaction records for the last four years*' – and got what they wanted in a matter of minutes. Crime show TV was an industry devoted to peddling the necessary fairy tale: you can't do terrible things and get away with it. You do a terrible thing, sooner or later *you will have to pay*.

Whereas...

She imagined taking the complaint to her grandfather's God, that sinners were supposed to get punished. And God smiling and raising his Santa Claus eyebrows and saying: Whereas...

‘Cappuccino?’ Will asked. ‘I’m going.’ There were three other detectives in the low-ceilinged and strip-lit room. Will Fraser (Valerie’s partner), Laura Flynn and Ed Perez. Along with Valerie, the insomniacs. The spooked. The obsessed. The burning-out. Over the next couple of hours the rest of the team would assemble and the incident room would fill with the collective vibe of irritation and effort and frustration and exhaustion and boredom. In spite of which, Valerie knew, she’d have to gather herself to brief the new FBI liaison. She thought of Callum last night saying: Your ass is an argument-winner. She thought of the distance she’d travelled from her body since Blasko. Since love. Blasko had said to her, in the first few weeks of their relationship: You’re prettier than a seahorse. His compliments were delivered like dispassionate scientific conclusions. They’d filled her with shy pride. Some men, he’d said, will be scanning the room for the icy blondes with pneumatic tits. For other men – a minority, I’ll grant you – you’ll be the only woman *in* the room. I’m one of those men. Just remember that when you start thinking about dumping me.

‘Yeah, thanks,’ she said to Will, without looking up from her desktop screen. There was a time when she would have answered more creatively. Something like: ‘Two sugars. And stir it anticlockwise, dickhead.’ She’d lost the impulse to joke. Will still had it. He was the kind of good human being whose goodness derived from knowing the precise degree to which he was a shitty human being but not letting it cancel out the degree to which he wasn’t.

‘Today’s rating?’ he asked.

Valerie looked up at him. He was forty-two, tall and leanly built, skin the colour of faded mahogany, long eyelashes and an expression of languid mischief.

‘Five,’ Valerie lied. ‘You?’

The ‘rating’ was on a scale of one to ten. One being certainty that what you were doing was going to solve the case and be a victory over the Powers of Darkness, ten being a terminal admission

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of failure, walking out the door and never being a cop again. And possibly *joining* the Powers of Darkness.

NOT TODAY.

‘Eight,’ Will said. ‘But Marion told me this morning she’s not sure she desires me any more. Also, I’ve got a huge boil on my ass. It’s possible the two facts are connected.’

When he’d gone for the coffees Valerie sat listening to Laura Flynn’s superhumanly fast fingers at work on her laptop. She knew that very soon she’d have to get up, walk across the room and stand in front of the murder map. She’d have to stand in front of the murder map and try for the ten-thousandth time to make it talk. The murder map didn’t want to talk. The murder map’s line was that it had nothing new to say. But the murder map was a liar. You had to believe the whole case was a liar. You had to believe the whole case was trying desperately to keep something from you. You had to believe that eventually you’d catch The Case out. And you had to do it before The Case killed you. Or before it made you break your lover’s heart.

THIRTEEN

‘As you know,’ Captain Deerholt said, when the task force had gathered, ‘Special Agent Myskow is on sick leave. So as of today Special Agent York will be joining us. She’ll be meeting with each of you individually later. I know you’re up to your necks, but please try to make yourselves available within the next twenty-four hours. Right now I want to give her an overview while you’re all here. Detective Hart?’

Valerie stood by the murder map. She didn’t need notes. She didn’t need to refresh her memory. Most of the time there was nothing else *in* her memory. (Apart from Blasko, and the Suzie Fallon case, and the death of love.) Special Agent Carla York was early thirties. A petite but visibly fit woman with hazel eyes and precise, understated make-up. Mousy hair scraped back into a short ponytail. Navy blue pants suit. Low-heeled snug-fitting black boots. No wedding ring. No jewellery at all, in fact, as far as Valerie could see. The thought of dealing with her – someone new – had been draining her all morning. A new person was a restatement of the only fact that mattered: You haven’t caught him yet.

‘OK,’ Valerie said, indicating the ‘before’ photograph of Katrina on the map. ‘First victim, Katrina Mulvaney, thirty-one-year-old white female. Educational outreach officer at the San Francisco zoo. Resident of the Bay Area, body *found* in the Bay Area. Second

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victim, Sarah Keller, twenty-four-year-old white female, prostitute, resident of St Louis, Missouri, body found near Richfield, Utah. Third victim, Angelica Martinez, twenty-eight-year-old Hispanic female, schoolteacher, resident of Lubbock, Texas, body found near Laramie, Wyoming. Fourth victim, Shyla Lee-Johnson, thirty-four-year-old white female, prostitute, drug addict, resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, body found near Elk City, Oklahoma. Fifth victim, Yun-seo Hahn, twenty-five-year-old Korean-American female, grad student at Berkeley, resident of the Bay Area, body found in the Bay Area. Sixth victim, Leah Halberstam, forty-year-old white female, housewife, resident of Plano, Texas, body found near Salina, Kansas. Latest victim, Lisbeth Cole, thirty-four-year-old white female, prostitute, resident of Omaha, Nebraska, body found near Algona, Iowa. This is not the order in which the bodies were discovered. It's the best guess order based on approximate date of death.'

Valerie paused. She wished there were windows in here. It would have done a lot for her right then to be able to look out and see the sky, even a mid-December sky in San Francisco. From their long way away the dead women had turned their attention on her. Not with urgency. Not with expectation. Just with dumb sadness. Because they knew she felt nothing for them.

'All the victims were mutilated, most likely before being killed. Mixture of knives and tools. We know for certain three of them – Katrina, Yun-seo and Lisbeth – were raped. All of them carry fingerprints and DNA from the same individual, and the last three victims – Yun-seo, Leah and Lisbeth – carry fingerprints and DNA from a second individual. We don't know if it's been two guys from the start, or if the second guy's been recruited. Neither, in any case, has a match in the databases.'

The impatience and boredom in the room was palpable. This meeting was tactically redundant: York was going to get all the information anyway, through the eight investigators working the case, and Valerie was going to sit down with her in private later

this afternoon. The real reason Deerholt had got them together was because he was worried about the creeping sense of futility. He was worried about *morale*. This was a reminder: Hey, come on, we're doing this together, we'll get there, don't give up. We're a family.

'Linkage blindness was inevitable,' Valerie said. 'Given the timeline, the geographical spread and the victim demographic, three years isn't bad. If it weren't for the signature and DNA we'd probably still be blind, at least beyond the two Bay Area victims.'

The two Bay Area victims were Valerie's blessing. And her curse. It was the only site for more than one of the murders. It was assumed (desperation, Valerie admitted, privately) that Katrina's killer was either from or had close connections here. Everything else was scattered around Middle America. The Bay Area (desperation insisted) was special. It was Valerie's belief that if the killers had known any of their victims before they *became* their victims, that victim was Katrina Mulvaney. *Start with what you know*, was what Valerie's creative writing tutor had told her in a class she'd taken when she was a teenager. Now applied to the reasoning of murderers. Life never tired of these perverse connections. On the surface Yun-seo Hahn didn't help, since serial killers, as Jodie Foster had made big screen gospel, tended to hunt within their own racial and social group. But since they had nothing better than geography to go on, the working principle was to set up the task force in the place where it was believed the unknown subjects either currently lived, had formerly lived, or at the very least had forged some sort of connection to the first – and possibly fifth – victim. That was part of the San Francisco rationale. That and the simple fact that they had a bigger budget and better resources than any of the other states involved.

'As far as the signature goes,' Valerie continued, 'it's probably the one thing that doesn't need repeating. But for the record, our guys leave objects inside their victims. Random objects or objects with significance, we don't know yet. No rare moths or butterflies, sadly. Nothing, in fact, that helps us narrow it down. They leave

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them in the vagina, mouth, or anus, except in the cases of Yun-seo and Leah, when they left them in the opened abdomen. We're assuming because the objects were simply too large for their first choice orifices.'

Valerie had spent hypnotic hours with the body photographs – the 'after' shots in the murder-makeover. Yun-seo's gaping guts. A heavy duty claw hammer jammed in between the large and small intestines. Surreally worse than this – a hammer was at least a potential instrument of violence, was at least grimly congruent – was the glazed and depressingly cheery pottery goose her murderers left in Leah Halberstam. It wasn't life-sized but they'd still had to cut out half her internal organs to make room for it. According to the forensics report the evisceration had been done with a serrated fish knife. In the movies the goose would have borne a maker's mark, would have been an antique, would have reduced the number of people who might own or know where to find one. But this wasn't the movies. The goose had been mass-produced throughout the seventies. There were tens if not hundreds of thousands of them out there – or rather there had been. If you wanted to buy one now you'd have to trawl garage sales or junk shops or kitsch vintage boutiques that depended on people with more money than sense. It was the sort of object that would feature on an emo-hipster website called something like thingsmyparentsownthatfreakmeout.com.

'Katrina Mulvaney had the remains of a candy apple in her vagina,' Valerie said. 'Sarah Keller had a deflated balloon shoved down her throat. Angelica Martinez had a scrunched-up flyer from the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History's dinosaur exhibit stuffed into her anus. Shyla Lee-Johnson had a fork in her vagina. Lisbeth Cole had a two-inch-long piece of clear crystal – the consensus is it's meant to be a unicorn's horn – in her anus. If they're trying to tell us something' – Valerie looked at Carla York, not with hope but with reassurance that she didn't expect *her* to confirm this hypothesis – 'we don't know what it is yet.'

She could feel the room's deadness to the dead women. And her own. The homicide wisdom she'd come to late: in order to figure out who had done these things to a person you had to get the reality of the person out of the way. The person became a victim. A victim was a conundrum in flesh and blood. Catching the perp was earning the right to think of the victim as a person again. Trouble was, by the time you caught the perp (if you did) you were so fucking fried that you didn't give a shit about the person anyway. You just wanted to get drunk and watch sports. Or go out and fuck a complete stranger. You wanted to do anything, in fact, to postpone the reality, which was that tomorrow there would be another dead body, another conundrum in flesh and blood, another testimony in the case against the world as a place of hope, and light, and love. Especially if you'd already killed love yourself. That, for Valerie, had been the trade-off, the lesson she'd learned, eventually. Before the Suzie Fallon case three years ago her weakness as a cop was that she *couldn't* stop thinking of the victims as people. Because she'd had love in her life she'd been unable to stop thinking of the love the victims had had in theirs. Then, with the help of the Suzie Fallon case, she'd killed love. Now the victims were just ugly puzzles to be solved. She knew it had made her better at her job. But she saw the way people looked at her sometimes, the question their eyes asked: How come you're so cold, so clinical, so fucking *dead*?

'We're also aware of the possible irrelevance of the objects,' she continued, for Carla York's benefit. 'There are really only two ways to look at them. Either they have meaning – useful meaning, meaning that will help us figure out who these guys are – or they're just them fucking with us, giving us Serial Killer Standard Practice because they've seen the movies too.'

Everyone, Valerie knew, was sick of the objects. Each of the victims' before and after photos on the murder map had a label naming the object found inside her. It was soul-destroying to have to keep seeing the word 'balloon' or 'goose' attached to the image

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of a mutilated female body. It was exactly the sort of thing some twisted fuck would get a kick out of.

‘Nutshelling it: our guys abduct the women in one state, do what they do, then dump their bodies in another. Which obviously requires either a travelling job or no job at all. They could be independently solvent, but BSU is telling us that doesn’t fit the profile.’ Valerie felt Carla York not interjecting. Not yet, at any rate. Myskow would no doubt have told York that there was, to put it mildly, *doubt* among the team about the usefulness of profiling. Let me guess, Ed Perez – *uber*-FBI-sceptic – had said before Myskow had even got started, we’re looking for a white male between the ages of twenty-five and forty, with delusions of grandeur and a history of abuse. Low affect. Maybe a harelip or a speech impediment. Am I missing anything? It wasn’t fair, Valerie knew. Behavioural science had long since ditched the cookie-cutter psycho. The Bureau’s 2005 San Antonio Symposium on Serial Murder had devoted a lot of time and energy to exposing ‘Myths About Serial Killers’, many of which, they admitted, had been bred by early behavioural science’s own reductive optimism. The problem was, obviously, the more they conceded it wasn’t an exact science, the less useful it looked to investigating officers.

‘Either way, the high mobility is self-evident,’ Valerie said. ‘The good news is Leah Halberstam and Lisbeth Cole were found less than seventy-two hours after their deaths. We have dry casts of tyres that put a Class B RV within a mile of each burial site. The pool of compatible makes and models is big, and since more than eight million Americans own RVs, you can do the math. Plus we can’t rule out the possibility they’re using multiple vehicles. We’re working through traffic enforcement footage but if they kept off the major routes we’re blind.’

She glanced at Deerholt. That’s enough – right? We’re wasting time. Deerholt’s eyes flicked agreement. Wrap it up. Everyone’s still fucking depressed anyway. ‘With all the usual probability caveats,’ Valerie said, ‘we’re looking for two white males. One dark-haired and

dark-eyed, the other almost certainly a redhead. One at least with ties to the Bay Area. Shoe sizes ten and eight, respectively. Footwear prints lead us straight to Kmart shitkickers, so no help there. We've got everything we could possibly hope to get from Serology, and as I said, they're not shy with their DNA. But all of that's evidence dressed up with nowhere to go if we don't have suspects. We've been working on this for seven months. To date we've conducted more than two hundred and fifty interviews and questioned six suspects, all of whom have been ruled out. We've got good liaison with law enforcement in eight states, not to mention the Bureau – and yet here we still are. It feels like we know nothing. But one thing we do know is that they're speeding up. There were approximately eight months between victims one and two. Since then the intervals have been getting shorter. The last two victims are separated by only seven weeks. Acceleration breeds mistakes. They're going to make one. Let's not forget that.'

This was for Deerholt, and he knew it. Lead investigator rallying the troops.

The troops didn't believe it.

Neither did Valerie.

FOURTEEN

‘You feeling OK?’ Carla York said to Valerie. They were in Valerie’s Taurus, en route to Katrina’s parents’ place out in Union City. It was snowing, the pointless sort that wouldn’t stick, tiny flakes whisked by skirls of wind. Will Fraser was on a lead. What *he* called a lead. He’d been scouring vehicular refrigeration suppliers in the Bay Area (and beyond, though only Valerie knew this), convinced that if the killers were transporting corpses hundreds of miles, they’d want to keep them on ice. RV freezers aren’t big enough for a body, Will had said. Not unless you cut it up, which our guys aren’t doing. What if they broke down? What if they got pulled for a busted tail-light? If it were me I’d have a dummy shelf stocked with frozen steaks and waffles.

Valerie missed him. More acutely in the presence of Carla York, who knew nothing about her. Who’d spent the last hour of Valerie’s time giving her what felt like a recap exam. Why don’t you just go away and read the fucking reports? Valerie had several times been on the verge of saying. Savvy or paranoia had stopped her: there was a calm to Carla’s hazel eyes she didn’t trust. She imagined the FBI briefing: We’re a little concerned about the lead on this. She’s showing signs of stress. Word is there’s a no-joke drink problem. Go up there and take a look at her.

And now, on Deerholt’s instruction, she was riding with Valerie until further notice.

'I'm fine,' Valerie said. 'Can't shake this damn cold.' Which she regretted, immediately. All the investigators had at one time or another been forced to attend the department's stress awareness seminar. 'Physical Warning Signs and Symptoms of Stress' was the first component. 'Frequent Colds' was one of them. As were inexplicable aches and pains, nausea, dizziness, chest pain and rapid heartbeat. As was, probably, throwing up in the middle of brushing your teeth.

'Not that it matters much any more,' Valerie said, 'but are our guys psychos?'

Take control. Make *her* answer some questions.

'The alpha killer, maybe,' Carla said. 'But my money's on not both of them. It's more likely the beta's in thrall to him in some way, though it's obvious from the serology that he's at the very least getting his jollies with the corpses. Like a scavenger. It's unlikely the alpha would let him interfere while they're actually alive.'

Valerie sneaked a sidelong glance at her. Carla was staring straight out the windshield. Her hair was pulled back so tight it looked painful. Small face (*squirrelish*, Valerie thought), clean features and a maddeningly neat little mouth. Attractive? Not to men who were looking for surface glamour. But there wasn't a spare ounce on her, and her skin was flawless. The good thing about getting older as a man, Blasko had said to Valerie once, is that you get better at seeing beauty in women. Well, not beauty, maybe, but sexual wealth, sexual... *character*.

'If the alpha's a classic,' Carla said, 'then the control has to be all his. Which won't stop him blaming the beta for everything, including the murders. It's a good bet that's the dynamic. But the alpha will probably kill him when he's done.'

'Done?'

'If he ever gets done. Which he won't, because we're going to stop the motherfucker.'

The profanity was a jolt. Until now Carla might have been speaking to a class of grad students. Valerie's cynic stepped in: *She's just*

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mirroring. She's heard you swear, so she swears. It's what no-hopers are coached into doing on dating shows. It's what psychopaths learn to do.

Ostensibly Valerie was seeing Katrina's parents because the mother, Adele, had called to say she'd found something that might be significant. In reality, the visit was just to let them know they hadn't been forgotten. That their daughter hadn't been forgotten. That the hunt for the man or men who killed her was still live. There were, of course, victims' liaison officers, who kept all the families updated, but Valerie had spent a lot of time with the Mulvaney's in the early months. Too much, according to Will, who'd warned her about victim surrogacy. It wasn't Valerie he was worried about – Will was one of the people she caught looking at her with a little sadness these days – it was the parents.

'We found this in the basement,' Adele Mulvaney said, handing Valerie a plain black shoebox. 'It should have been in one of the plastic crates when she moved, I guess, but it was under a pile of Dale's junk. I thought you'd want to take a look at it.'

Dale was Katrina's father, and he wasn't home. The victim liaison officer had told Valerie he'd been drinking a lot. No surprise: one murder took more than one life. Adele was trimly dressed and her greying hair was still cut in its nifty bob, but you could see the wreckage in the light brown eyes, the broken world, the loss from which there would be no recovery. The house was cursorily decked for Christmas (they had grandchildren from Katrina's older brother, and the family would huddle to get through the holidays) but you could feel it had nearly killed them to do it. Even the tinselled tree had something strained and plaintive about it.

'It's just oddments,' Adele said. 'Ticket stubs and pens and some jewellery she'd outgrown. But there are some photos, and I thought ... I knew how much time you spent going through the photos on her phone and computer. I don't know. I just ...'

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‘You did right to call,’ Valerie said. ‘Would it be OK if we looked through this at the station? I’ll get it back to you as soon as I can.’

They stayed for a half-hour. Drank the obligatory coffee. Did their best to sound as if investigative energy was high.

Dale Mulvaney staggered onto the porch as they were leaving. Raw bourbon breath. To her own disgust, it made Valerie want a drink. Again.

‘How many is it now?’ he said.

‘Dale, honey—’

‘How many?’

‘Seven,’ Valerie said. ‘Mr Mulvaney, this is Special Agent York. I know it must seem—’

‘Special Agent? What’s special about her?’

‘Dale, stop it.’

‘You told us you’d get him,’ Dale Mulvaney said. ‘Except now it’s two of them. Now it’s *them*. You stood right there where you’re standing now and told us you’d find him. And now seven girls are dead. What are you doing? What the fuck are you *doing*?’

‘You should just go,’ Adele said. ‘It’s better if you just go. Dale, come on inside.’

Dale Mulvaney put his back against one of the porch posts and slid down to his bottom with a bump. ‘It’s a rhetorical question,’ he said. ‘I know what the fuck you’re doing. You’re doing nothing. Absolutely fucking *nothing*.’

In the car on the way back to the station, Carla said, ‘Don’t let it get to you.’

‘What?’

‘The father.’

Valerie bristled. The assumption that it *was* getting to her. For a moment she was so annoyed she couldn’t reply. Then she said, very calmly, ‘I don’t let it get to me.’ She’d almost said: It *doesn’t* get to me. Altered it at the last second. Then wondered which version was the truth.

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‘Well,’ Carla said. ‘It’s the brutal part of the job.’

Again, Valerie found herself unsure what the right rejoinder should be. Everything that came out of Carla’s mouth sounded like part of an elaborate mental sting operation, innocent remarks designed to expose the guilt of your responses. It was the woman’s self-containment. She had a way of watching you without looking at you. Plus her plain physical neatness made Valerie feel like a slob. Carla smelled of freshly laundered clothes and slightly citric shampoo.

‘Brutal is having your daughter raped and butchered,’ Valerie said. Which also felt like the wrong thing to say.

But Carla just nodded and said, quietly: ‘Right.’

While Carla went to get a sandwich Valerie sat at her desk and looked through the shoebox. Half a dozen barrettes and scrunchies, a travelling toothbrush, a lunch monitor pin, ticket stubs from concerts – Radiohead, the White Stripes, Nick Cave – a set of ridiculous wind-up chattering teeth, a clean white handkerchief, a half tube of L’Oréal foundation, some My Little Pony fridge magnets and fourteen photos, all but one of them featuring friends or family Valerie was sure they’d already interviewed.

The exception was a Polaroid of Katrina that looked to have been taken when she was around ten or eleven years old. She was wearing cut-off jeans (you could just make out the crescent birthmark on her left leg) and a bright yellow T-shirt that said Hoppercreek Camp and she was standing in front of what Valerie could only think of as a deformed tree – in that it appeared to have two trunks, one upright, the other growing at a thirty-degree angle to join it about five feet from the ground. Katrina had put one hand on her hip, in the mock-sexy way young girls did, and she was smiling, squinting into the sun. The same outlook of cautious optimism, tempered only slightly by juvenile awkwardness.

She put all the items back in the box and made a note to get someone to double-check there was no one in any of the other photos

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they ought to have spoken to but hadn't. It wasn't likely. Adele had given them a boxful of a mother's desperation.

Valerie's cell phone rang. It was Will.

'No joy,' he said. 'There's a guy in Santa Cruz had a big freezer unit installed in his Freelander four years ago. Turns out he's a sixty-four-year-old taxidermist with severe macular degeneration and a Seeing Eye dog. Had to give up driving *and* stuffing critters two years back.'

'Sorry,' Valerie said. 'Worth a shot.'

'How're the traffic cam numbers?'

'Restricting it to the four days before Leah and Lisbeth were found we've still got more than a hundred and fifty Class B RVs on the possible relevant interstates unchecked. They're doing it, but it's slow.'

'And Miss Quantico?'

'I think we're being evaluated. Or I am. So don't come in drunk.'

'But I just opened a bottle of Cuervo.'

'Don't even.'

The thought of a shot of tequila had made Valerie's salivary glands contract. And it was barely gone noon.

'All right,' Will said. 'I'll be back in an hour.'

Valerie dropped her phone. When she bent to retrieve it, pain shot from the base of her spine all the way into her shoulder blades. Enough to make her freeze for a few seconds, eyes shut.

When she opened them and sat back up, slowly, Blasko was standing in front of her desk, with his hands in his pockets.

'Hey, Skirt,' he said. 'Long time no see. You look terrible.'

FIFTEEN

Xander King – who had not always been Xander King, and was reminded of that fact when things like this happened – couldn't believe it. What kind of country place didn't have a milk jug? He'd been through every cupboard in the kitchen. Just a plain fucking milk jug! Or even a gravy jug. Preferably brown. What they called earthenware. It didn't matter what they called it. There wasn't one. If there was one he could put this mistake – which was Paulie's fault – right. This mistake could be... not corrected, exactly, but... brought into line. How far *out* of line this was was a terrible irritation, to him, like roaches scurrying under his skin. Mama Jean flickered and bloomed on his peripheral vision, smiling at the mess he'd made. It was Paulie's *fault*, goddammit. Let me do one. *I* want to do one. And Xander had said OK. What was he thinking? If Paulie *had* done it it wouldn't be his problem. But of course, useless shit that Paulie was, when the time came he, Xander, had had to take charge, because Paulie chickened out. Which made the whole thing his. Which meant there should have been a jug.

'I should go in there,' Paulie said. He was sitting on the floor in the kitchen gripping his injured knee. His face was wet with sweat. Xander – who, in desperation, was standing on one of the worktops and running his hands along the top of the wall cupboards, just in case for some reason there was a jug up there, maybe chipped or with a missing handle, that they hadn't used for years – ignored him.

'Xander?' Paulie said.

Still no response.

‘Hey. I’m saying—’

‘Shut up,’ Xander said. Then, after a pause, ‘You hear the way I’m saying that?’

Paulie radiated silence. But after a few moments said, ‘That’s not right.’

Xander got a splinter in his palm. The small pain made his scalp hot. He got down off the worktop. There was no jug. This couldn’t be put right. The bit of ease he’d got from what he’d done to the cunt in the living room was all gone. All the knots were as tight as ever. He was trying not to dwell on how all this had cheated him. But it was as if the whole day were laughing at him.

‘Go get the RV,’ he said.

‘It’s not right.’

‘Go get the RV. I’ve said that twice. Do you want me to say it a third time?’

Paulie looked away. Xander examined the splinter. Now he was going to have to look for tweezers. The roaches darted under his skin.

‘I can’t fucking *walk*,’ Paulie said.

‘It’s not far,’ Xander said. ‘You’ll do fine.’

Paulie didn’t move. Then, quietly, he said, ‘When we’ve got her inside, then.’

Xander was wondering if he shouldn’t just do Paulie right here and now. But this whole thing was enough of a mess already. And he was bone tired.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘When we get her in there.’

Paulie struggled to his feet, wincing.

No point telling him yet that she wasn’t going in the RV, Xander thought. No point telling him that this couldn’t – since there was no milk jug – be fixed. No point telling him that they were leaving her and her son where they were and driving away. No point telling him until he’d fetched the vehicle. No point telling him much of anything any more, because soon he’d be dead.