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**Stony Cross : a novel and critical commentary**

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*Stony Cross* : A Novel and critical commentary

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

School of Creative Studies and Media

University of Bangor

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises a novel, *Stony Cross* and a critical commentary that suggests the novel's contribution is elucidated through an examination of its illustration of ideological interpellation.

*Stony Cross* is set in an eponymous mining village in central Scotland. It charts the life of a teenage boy as he is positioned within networks of working-class Protestant culture. In the opening chapters, his mother dies and his parentage is called into question, leaving him partially removed from his familial relationships. As a result, he falls under the influence of a drugs gang, and is incorporated into a world that becomes increasingly violent.

The critical part of the thesis argues that growing up in a working class mining community constructed a desire within the author that ultimately brought him to crisis. This account is analysed through a framework constructed using the theory of Louis Althusser and Jaques Lacan in order to unpack the strands of ideology that intersect within the body of the protagonist of *Stony Cross* and constitute a desire for agency which partly manifests in a fantasy narrative. The protagonist's relationship with his fantasy illustrates the individual's relationship with ideology.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>STONY CROSS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CRITICAL COMMENTARY .....</b>	<b>179</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	180
CHAPTER ONE.....	183
CHAPTER TWO.....	194
CHAPTER THREE.....	203
CHAPTER FOUR.....	212
CHAPTER FIVE .....	217
CHAPTER SIX .....	222
CONCLUSION.....	234
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>237</b>

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# Stony Cross

A Novel

by

Mark McNay

Part One

# Autumn

## Chapter One

When he smiled, I noticed how red his eyes were. 'This stuff is fucking unreal,' he said as he had another toke.

'Come on to fuck,' I said. 'Hand it over.'

I didn't even smoke fags, so it made me cough. After a couple of blasts I had to lean on the wall of the Lodge to steady myself. Spray-painted letters seemed to swirl into the roughcast.

'It's from Morocco,' he said.

'Is that right?'

'This time last week it was up a camel's arse,' he said as he took it back.

'Being trekked along the desert and into that Marrakech.'

'Where it was loaded into one of them container ships and landed in Greenock.'

'And brought down here in an old woman's handbag.'

'She sneaks it into the community centre.'

'And sells it to pay for cat food.'

We walked along the towpath. The back end of a car poked through the weeds that covered the canal. It was orange with rust. Tommy had a last couple of smokes and flicked the roach into the water. 'What's happening at school then?'

'Hitler had us reading about the Jacobite Rebellion.'

'Lot of fucking rubbish,' he said. 'What good's that shite to us now?' He pointed to the old railway bridge. The girders hung like the ribs of a skeleton. 'I mean look at the state of the place. Bonnie Prince Charlie isn't going to sort this it.'

'It's interesting,' I said. 'And the themes are universal.'

'Universal? Sounds like the old fucker's got his hand up your arse right now.' He moved his head from side to side. 'Please sir, the themes are universal.' His voice got deeper. 'Well done MacGregor, come to my office after school. And, eh, bring some lubricant. We can't have you limping home again.'

'Aye, your mammy,' I said.

'My old dear would probably enjoy it,' he said. 'Unlike yours. She'd just lie there telling the cunt he was a disgrace to his profession.'

I had a vision of my mammy on the floor with Hitler. It almost made me shudder. 'Shut it,' I said. 'That's disgusting.'

‘Serves you right,’ he said. ‘What are you doing at school at your age? You should be out in the wide world, earning a living.’

‘Like you are?’

When we passed the bridge, we turned off the embankment and headed for the main street. Tommy walked with an exaggerated swagger. ‘I’m not just a government statistic.’

‘What have you been doing this week?’

He smiled as if he’d been waiting for me to ask. ‘You’ll never guess.’

‘What?’

‘No guess.’

‘Just fucking tell me.’

He smiled again and chewed at his bottom lip. ‘I shagged Morag yesterday.’

‘No you never.’

He crossed his hands over his heart. ‘Swear I did.’

‘Shut up.’

‘I did,’ he said. ‘Seriously.’

The look in his eye told me it was true. I glanced at the shop my mammy used to get my shoes from. It had been closed down. Envelopes were stuffed in its letterbox. I wondered what it was like to actually get your hole. ‘Was it good?’ I asked.

‘Lovely,’ he said as he clenched his fist and moved it up and down.

‘What was it like?’

‘Do you know when you’re dead thirsty and you have a nice drink of cold water?’

‘Aye,’ I said with a nod.

He shook his head. ‘Well it’s fuck all like that,’ he said and walked a bit faster.

When I caught up with him, I grabbed his elbow. ‘No really,’ I said. ‘What was it like?’

He frowned like he was concentrating, then looked at the sky and sucked in a breath of air. ‘Do you know when you’re on a double decker?’ He smiled and held up his fist again. ‘And the vibrations give you a huge fucking stander?’

‘Aye.’

‘And as soon as the bus reaches your stop you run into the house and go straight up the toilet to beat one out?’

I nodded.

‘Well it’s nothing like that either,’ he said. ‘You fucking wanker.’

I swiped at him but he dodged it and started to jog. He stopped at the railings next to the church. I took my time as I stepped towards him. I wasn’t going to ask him again, I knew that.

He didn’t start talking until we got to the hill. He coughed and turned to look at me. ‘I can’t describe it,’ he said. ‘All I can say is that it was fucking brilliant.’

‘Do you think she liked it as well?’

He nodded. ‘Fucking loved it.’

‘How do you know?’

‘She was moaning and that,’ he said. ‘And it was soaking.’

‘Are you not worried about getting her pregnant?’

‘I used a Johnny,’ he said with a frown. ‘Do you think I’m fucking stupid?’ He nodded up the hill to the bus stop. Duncan was standing there waiting. He waved when he saw us and tapped his wrist.

The subway was pure jammed. The last few men could only just squeeze in. They had to hold their heads at odd angles to avoid banging them on the doors. I felt like shrinking into myself when a fat arse came close to my face. Tommy nudged me and wafted his hand over his nose. The two of us burst out laughing and the owner of the bum looked round. His eyes were bleary with drink. He smiled at us and shook his head. ‘Weans,’ he said and turned back to his mates. Then Tommy screwed his face up at me and repeated it with a lisp. Weans. We laughed so much I got a sore stomach.

When we got to Ibrox, Tommy and Duncan stood up. I followed as close as I could without treading on their heels. I almost didn’t have to move my legs because the crowd seemed to push me towards the exit. The draught of the leaving train dragged the smoke of freshly lit cigarettes through my hair and into my chest. I sneezed and rubbed my hand on the side of my jeans. An old man said ‘Bless you.’

Duncan passed me my ticket at the turnstiles. I was pushed through the steel barrier and into a group of guys who were singing, ‘Hello, hello, we are the Billy Boys.’ It was like being up to my neck in a sea of blue scarves. I turned a couple of



times before I heard my name and saw my pals standing by the steps. I splashed towards them. My head was barely breaking the surface and my breath was coming in gulps. Tommy put his arm over my shoulder and we started the climb up to the terraces. When we got to the top, the noise of the crowd hit me in waves of red, white and blue.

The racket got even worse when the teams came out of the tunnel. They warmed up by kicking balls around. They didn't look very big from where we were. I would have got a better view on the telly. After a few minutes the referee blew his whistle. The players got into position, and the game started. I tried to pay attention but I was always behind the reactions of the crowd. I'd hear them shout, or groan and half the time I couldn't see what it was they were on about.

I thought of Fiona as I watched. I could smell her perfume and feel the heat of her body against mine. My stomach lurched when I remembered touching the seam of her knickers. I wondered how long it would be before she let me do what Tommy did to Morag. I was brought back to the game when the people around me went quiet. Tommy hunched forward and Duncan twisted his programme into a tight roll. Celtic were getting the better of us. The ball was slid past our players as if we were a team from the Sunday League. The Celtic captain got the ball, dribbled it towards the keeper, then fired it right into our goal. 'John Collins,' said Duncan as the man waved to his supporters and ran in an arc before them.

A Rangers defender picked the ball from the net. As he made his way to the centre spot, he hung his head as if he was a wee boy walking home. When the teams were in their positions, the referee blew his whistle. Rangers tapped the ball to each other as they tried to work out how to make a play. A green shirt charged between them and took possession of the ball. Within seconds Celtic were racing towards our goal.

'Oh no,' said Duncan, holding his hands over his face.

After the second goal, the Rangers supporters were quiet. A few of them lifted themselves from their seats and made for the exits. They looked like men who'd had a hard day at work and were sneaking off early.

You could hardly hear the final whistle for the chanting from the Celtic end. The Rangers marched from the stadium as if we were going to a funeral, two-nil ringing in our ears. When we got onto the street, Duncan pulled us away from the crowd and down a cobbled alleyway. We passed this couple. The man's face was

swollen and red with the drink. I'd never seen anybody as ugly as the woman. Tommy elbowed me and pointed his thumb back at them.

'Wonder what she looks like at six in the morning.'

'Coughing her guts up.'

'Wanting rode.'

He stuck his bottom jaw out and grabbed me and started going 'shag me Jamie, would you just shag me.' In the end, Duncan had to tell him to shut it.

Eventually, we came to this pub. 'The Samuel,' the sign said in red, white and blue letters. Below the words, the walls and windows were painted black. Someone had spray painted Provos on the stone. The words were half scrubbed out.

There wasn't much of a selection of drinks. Two taps for beer, and only whisky and Eldorado on the shelves. A couple of men had scars on their faces. I tried not to stare, but my eye was dragged back to look. One of them had a split right through his ear. Duncan grabbed me by the arm. 'Come on,' he said. We pushed through the bar and into the lounge. Duncan gave his brother a tenner and told him to get us a drink. We sat next to a doorway that was covered by a red velvet curtain. There wasn't anyone else in the room. Tommy had to ring a bell to get the barman to come through. I put my hand on the table but it was sticky so I rested them in my lap and glanced round at the place. It was pure manky. My mammy would have spent hours cleaning it.

'What're we doing here?' I asked.

'We'll have a couple of pints,' said Duncan. 'Wait for the crowds to ease at the subway, then we'll set off for home.'

Tommy arrived with the beer. He sat down and pulled a magazine out of his jacket. He passed it to me. The Loyalist Prisoners Welfare Association it said across the front. He flicked it open and showed me an article called Giro Gerry.

'Do you see this?' he said. 'Gerry Adams is on the Bureau.'

'My arse,' said Duncan. 'He's an MP.' He grabbed the page and read it. 'The dirty bastard.'

'He won't accept the wages of the parliament,' said Tommy. 'So he's claiming benefits.'

'Is that not typical?' said Duncan as he lifted his pint. He gurgled the beer down then displayed his empty glass. 'Are you getting one in then?' he said to me.

'But I'm under age.'

‘So what?’

‘They’ll know.’

‘Just ask for lager,’ he said. ‘You’ll be all right.’

Except for an old couple standing next to a suitcase, the subway station was empty. The only reminder of the crowds of supporters was a football programme lodged in the space between the electric track and a sleeper. We had fifteen minutes to wait so we sat on a bench and watched people arrive on the platform. I listened to the brothers describe what they wanted to do to the girls that walked past. Tommy even pointed to an old woman about forty and said he wouldn’t mind a go with her. Duncan said he was sick. His tongue came out as he said it. Tommy turned to me.

‘What do you think?’ he said. I looked from one to the other. I didn’t know what to say.

‘I suppose I would,’ I said. ‘If I was desperate enough.’

‘I’d love to shag her,’ said Tommy.

‘What for?’ said Duncan. ‘So that you could borrow her bus pass?’

‘No, you diddy,’ said Tommy. ‘There would be none of that coy shit with her. She’d have you straight to the bedroom for the business.’

Lights flashed deep inside the tunnel. The three of us walked to the yellow line and stood and waited. The train stopped and the carriage door hissed open. I was just getting my foot on the step when Tommy pulled me out of the way. ‘Last one on is a poof,’ he said and both of them barged past. I felt the red rush up into my cheeks as they shouted homo at me. It made me feel like a right prick. I glanced from face to face, then to the adverts above the windows, before my eyes settled on the floor and the variety of shoes.

A few men came on at the next station. They were wearing Celtic scarves and even though they were laughing, they had angry faces. ‘What a game,’ one of them said as he opened a can of beer. A gush of foam flowed from it and over his fist. He licked it off and lifted the can to his lips. As he guzzled his eyes roamed the people on the carriage.

He noticed me staring at him. ‘What are you looking at?’

I tried to tear my eyes away, but they were glued. I didn’t say anything, just gazed for a while longer before Tommy elbowed me in the side. I dropped my face to the floor.

He whispered in my ear. 'Are you trying to get us a kicking?'

We got off at Buchanan Street. The Celtic fans stayed on. Tommy stopped on the platform. People passed us and headed for the stairs. When there was no one next to the carriage, Tommy jumped back through the doors. He pulled out his scarf and waved it. 'No Surrender,' he shouted and leapt off. The Celtic fans lurched forward as the doors hissed and closed. The train beeped and started to move. We ran after it shouting.

'Hello, Hello, we are the Billy Boys.'

We gave it the fingers as it disappeared into the tunnel.

## Chapter Two

My mammy was bent over the oven, closing the door. My mouth watered when the smell of cooking wafted into my nose. Sunday dinner was one of the highpoints of my week. 'I'm starving.'

'Well you'll have to wait,' she said. She stood erect and pushed her hands into her back. Then she settled in her chair by the table. The newspaper was open at the crossword, and a pen was between her fingers. As she rested the nib of it on one of the clues, I noticed how grey she looked.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm just tired.'

'Do you want me to make you a tea?'

She nodded as I lifted the kettle. When it was boiled, I put her cup next to her.

'Can I have a biscuit?'

She shook her head, but didn't look up. 'It'll spoil you for your dinner.'

'What is it?'

'Steak pie,' she said as she filled in a word. 'Now go and finish the homework you were supposed to do yesterday.'

I climbed the stairs and put on the Prodigy. I turned the volume down so she wouldn't hear it. As the synthesisers beat to the rhythm of breaking glass, I stared at the book about Culloden. But all the shite about tactics and strategy and chains of command made it hard for me to see what the fuck was going on. The harder I thought about it, the more my head slipped back to the Celtic game and the masses of men waving and cheering and singing. Instead of the Jacobite charging with swords into the Hanoverian grapeshot, all I could see was gangs of men piling from the terraces with scarves wrapped around their faces and broken bottles in their hands.

But, saying that, I did manage to get it finished before my mammy called me down for dinner. I went into the kitchen and sat in front of my plate. I noticed there wasn't one set for her.

'Are you not having any?'

'I had some while I was making it,' she said.

The phone rang. She nodded me to start as she left to answer it. The stew was that good I quickly shovelled my way through it. And, because she wasn't in the room to watch me, I finished it by licking the plate. I was just dropping it into the sink when

she came back into the kitchen. 'Michael's had a promotion,' she said as she cut me a bit of jam pudding. 'This big enough for you?' She put it in a bowl.

'Suzanne's happy,' she said as I sat back down and blew on a spoonful of sponge. 'With the extra money she's wanting to extend their house.'

'But it's huge as it is.'

'You know what she's like.'

I nodded as I chewed. She went on about my sister and her never being satisfied. 'Poor old Michael,' she said with a shake of her head. 'She could've done a lot worse.'

'How's wee Sophie?'

'She's started the school. And Suzanne says she's enjoying it. But I think she's a bit worried they're not getting enough quality time.'

I was washing the dishes and watching the hens attack the leftovers I'd scattered in their run, when Fiona came through the back gate. She had a tee-shirt on that said Wonderful on it, the letters stretched like they were written on balloons. The sun caught her hair as she walked down the path, making it glow red. I wiped the suds off my hands and opened the door. I didn't know whether to kiss her or cuddle her or just say hiya. She stepped over the threshold and we were in each other's arms and the smell of her filled my nose and I didn't even think of my mammy being there until I heard her cough behind us. A blush ran up my cheeks as Fiona's voice cut into the steamy air of the kitchen.

'Hiya Mrs MacGregor.'

'Have I not told you to call me Esther?'

'Allright, eh, Esther.'

'How are you getting on hen?'

'Not bad.'

'And your dad?'

'Aye, good.'

Whilst my mammy ran through every member of Fiona's family, I got the tartan shopper from the cupboard under the stairs. I went to the table, gathered up the tubs and arranged them inside the bag.

'Are we off then?'

My mammy's hip clicked as she put her hands on the table and pushed herself to a stand. She rubbed her side as she limped to the door. 'I'm not as fit as I was,' she said.

'You stay here and have a rest,' said Fiona. 'Me and Jamie will get the brambles.'

But she shook her head. She leaned against the wall and pulled on her wellies. 'I'll be all right in a minute,' she said. 'Once my joints have eased.'

'If you're sure,' said Fiona.

We walked until we reached the fence that marked the boundary between the farmer's field and the woods. I stood on the middle strand of barbed wire and lifted the top. My mammy bent through the gap. Fiona smiled as she ducked down.

'Thank you kind sir,' she said, as if she was one of the women we'd read about in History.

As we followed my mammy into the cool air under the trees, Fiona grabbed my hand and squeezed it. It was like the whole world was spinning on the connection between our fingers. A fat bluebottle appeared, buzzed round my head a couple of times, before zigzagging between tree trunks and disappearing back into the gloom. A pair of wee birds tweeted to each other as they hopped on the branches above us.

Fiona stopped to look at them. I stood and gazed at her freckled cheeks.

My told us to come on. And to pay attention to where we were going. 'There's holes in the ground here,' she said. 'And rusty bits of metal to trip over, or get jagged by and end up with lockjaw or something.'

'So watch yourself,' said Fiona into my ear. She hooked her hand round my waist as we followed.

The ground started to dip by the time we got to the other side of the trees. In the distance, lines of dry-stone dykes marked out the hillside. The squares were different shades of yellow and green. One of them was dotted with sheep. A farmer crossed his land in a red coloured truck.

We passed a rusty sign that said 'Beware Cliffs.' Above us, swallows wheeled and twitched like fighter planes. Just as one of them swooped past a fence that poked above some bracken, she told us it was going for insects that gathered in the quarry. 'It's dangerous over there,' she said. She moved her finger and pointed up the slope. 'But all that is covered in brambles, so we should go home with plenty.'



Fiona smiled at me, her tongue and lips tinted purple. She looked like an advert for a health drink. Her hair corkscrewed over her eyes. I brushed the strands out of the way before leaning close and kissing her.

She pulled away. 'Not in front of your mammy,' she said. 'I've still got a beamer about earlier.'

I glanced over to see where she was. Her fingers were moving over the fruit as she filled her tub. I watched her stand upright as if she had a pain in her back. Then her hand went to her head and she sat down. I called out to her, but she didn't seem to hear. I made my way round the brambles, skirting a bush of gorse, before I came to her, still sitting on the ground. Her tub of berries was on its side, the contents half spilled onto the grass.

'Are you all right mammy?'

She turned her head towards me and blinked. She wasn't quite looking at me. 'I just had a funny turn,' she said.

I kneeled beside her and after a few seconds she seemed to focus on me. She kept saying she was fine, but she looked a bit pale. I told her we should have a break from the picking and find a nice spot where she could get some air and a rest. Fiona nodded as I spoke and said, 'That's right Mrs MacGregor.'

I helped her to the shaded spot of grass next to the trees. There was a cool wind funnelled up from the quarry. She tilted her head back as it flowed over her. By the time I collected the fallen berries and put them in the bag, she said she was feeling better. But she still didn't look right. I turned to Fiona and she nodded with her lips tight together.

'We should get her home.'

The walk through the woods brought some colour back into her face. She made a joke about her age, and climbing fences to get brambles, and it serving her right if it was all too much. On the way down the hill she told Fiona she was sorry to have messed the day up. Fiona said it was all right. She even called her Esther.

We got back to the house and she went into the living room. She slumped in her chair and told me to put the telly on. I flicked on BBC 1 and had to go through BBC 2 and ITV before she was happy.

'Is there anything I can get you?' asked Fiona.

'I'll tell you what hen,' she said. 'I'd kill for a cup of tea and maybe a wee biscuit.'



While she was in the kitchen my mammy went on about how she was a good lassie and that she was worth hanging onto. I told her to shoosh in case she heard her. When she came back I had to swallow before I even looked at her.

‘Could you give me a hand with my homework?’

I could feel my mammy’s eyes on me.

‘That stuff about Culloden is doing my nut in,’ I said. ‘Who was the Duke of Cumberland?’

Fiona glanced at the door then back at me. ‘Shall we go up to your room?’ She turned to my mammy. ‘If that’s all right with you Esther?’

‘Course it is hen.’

She nodded as she broke a biscuit against her plate. Then she pointed the bit at the clock. ‘But mind Jamie,’ she said. ‘You need to go to your uncle Andrew’s in an hour.’

I closed the door and opened the window. The curtains fluttered in the draft. I skinned up a one paper and we had a few blasts. She put on my De La Soul tape. As the music curled out of the speakers, she stepped close to me, her hips going like she was in a nightclub. Her eyes were glowing like they were sapphires caught in the sun. She put her hand on my neck and started kissing me. After a bit, she put my hand on one of her tits. She slid her tongue into my mouth and rubbed her fingers into the back of my head. I got a stander as I touched down her side and stroked between her legs.

‘That’s nice,’ she whispered.

I wrestled her onto the bed and started tugging at her clothes. The hash was making me that horny I couldn’t help myself.

‘Take it easy,’ she said, in breaths to the side of our mouths. ‘You’ll rip something.’ She reached for her bra and unfastened it. Her nipples stuck out like brambles. When I sucked at one she moaned. I thought I was being too rough, so went to pull away. But she pushed my head against her chest. ‘That’s lovely,’ she said. ‘You can bite a wee bit harder.’

Her hand rubbed my stomach and tugged at my belt. I unbuttoned the front of her skirt, pulled at the zipper, then wriggled it down her thighs. My breath caught in my throat as I glanced at her knickers. I slid my fingers under them and felt how wet and hot she was. But she didn’t let me touch it for long. She struggled out of my arms like she was coming out of the sea. She told me to stop.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I might get pregnant.’

‘But I’ll pull it out.’

‘You’re just saying that because you want your hole.’

‘Swear I will,’ I said, my heart beating against my ribs.

‘I’m not letting you shag me,’ she said.

I sighed and flopped onto the pillow. ‘OK,’ I said.

I was lying there feeling like telling her she was nothing but a prick teaser, when his fingers started to tickle across my stomach. Then she tapped the button of my jeans with her nail.

‘If you want,’ she said. ‘I’ll suck it for you.’

It didn’t take me long to come. She spat it onto the carpet.

‘Yuk,’ she said. She lay her head on my stomach. ‘Was that OK?’ she asked.

‘Did I do it right?’

My throat felt like it would shut. ‘You’re beautiful,’ I whispered.

‘Do you think so?’

‘I can’t believe how nice that was.’

‘Have you not had it before?’

I was tempted to lie, to tell her I’d been with a few girls. But I didn’t.

She lifted her head and looked at me. Her hair was a mess and her face was creased. ‘Am I your first?’

I nodded.

‘I wouldn’t have guessed,’ she said.

I lay back on the pillow and put my hands behind my head. She cuddled into my side and hooked her leg over mine.

‘Jamie?’

‘Fiona.’

‘What are you going to do when you finish school?’

‘My mammy wants me to go to university,’ I said as I pulled a bit of grass from the back of her tee-shirt. ‘What about you?’

‘I was thinking about becoming a vet.’

‘You certainly know how to tame a wild beast.’

‘I’ve always been good with animals,’ she said. She nodded at my dick.

‘Especially wee ones.’

‘Watch your cheek,’ I said. ‘Any more of that and I won’t be helping you with your homework.’

She sat up and rearranged her skirt. ‘We’ve not got time anyway,’ she said. ‘You need to go and see your uncle.’

### Chapter Three

He was breathing heavily when he opened the door. 'Come away in son,' he said. He nodded at the pan I was holding. 'Is that my dinner?'

'Stew and tatties.'

He rubbed his hands together. 'Lovely.'

We went into the kitchen. I turned on the stove.

'How are you doing?' I asked.

'I'm all right,' he said between breaths. He coughed into his fist then gripped the side of the table. 'Hopefully I'll see another Christmas.'

'You better,' I said. 'I don't want to miss out on my present.'

'I've already got it,' he said. 'So you don't need to worry.'

When his dinner was heated up I followed him into the living room. He sat by the hearth and I put the plate on his lap.

'This is nice,' he said as he chewed. 'Your mammy has excelled herself.'

'Well you enjoy it,' I said. 'While I get this place tidied up.'

He wiped gravy off his chin. 'You're a good lad.'

I emptied the scuttle onto the fire, and the flames dampened. I went out to the bunker and refilled it. Then I went round the flat picking up dirty dishes and piling them by the side of the sink. I got a duster from under the kitchen counter and a can of furniture polish. He nodded as I shined up the windowsill.

'Good lad,' he said again.

He finished his dinner as I vacuumed the carpet. After I put the Hoover away, I took his plate through to the kitchen and washed up the rest of the dishes. He had his head on his chest and his eyes closed when I went back into the living room. He stirred as soon as I appeared.

'You've done a good job,' he said. He pointed at the tea caddy on the top of the bookcase. I fetched it over and he popped the lid. He drew out a bundle of notes and peeled off a fiver. 'Here you are,' he said.

I crumpled it into my pocket. 'You shouldn't have your dosh lying around like that.'

'It's been there for thirty years.'

'You could get some interest for it from a bank.'

‘I’m not letting people like that use my money,’ he said. ‘You never know what the cunts are doing with it.’

I sat down and watched the fire as it got a hold on the fresh coal. It smouldered for a while. The smell was strong and eggy. Then flames appeared and leaped around as the smoke warmed enough to burn.

‘Your mammy tells me you were at the football yesterday,’ he said in a hiss of breath.

I sighed. ‘We lost.’

‘I read it in the paper.’

‘It was exciting though.’

‘Aye, I’m sure it was.’

He reached into the sideboard for his fags. He sucked smoke into his chest a little at a time. It made him gasp like he was being whipped. When he’d had about a third, he nipped the end off it and put it back in the packet. He held his hand over his mouth as he started to cough. Then he stood up and bent towards the grate. He spat in the fire and it hissed. He picked up the poker and weighed it in his hand before thrusting it in and out of the embers. He could have been sticking a knife into somebody’s guts.

‘I used to love the Rangers,’ he said. ‘There was nothing on this earth that raised my heart like the sight of a blue shirt putting the ball into the back of the net.’ He sat down and wiped his brow. ‘But all that stuff about Catholics and Protestants used to make me fucking sick.’

‘But it was a good day out,’ I said as I stared at a bit of soot glowing in the chimneybreast. ‘I really enjoyed myself.’

‘I’m sorry son,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to put a dampener on your fun.’ He reached for his fags again. ‘But at them games there’s a lot of pressure to hate people just because they go to a different church.’

He looked at me. ‘I mean,’ he said as he shrugged his shoulders. ‘That’s just fucking stupid.’

I didn’t know what to say, so I just stared at the fire.

He lit up then pointed the burnt match at me. ‘I don’t want you getting involved in that,’ he said. ‘It’s not good for you.’

## Chapter Four

When I got back from school, there was a note from my mammy saying she wouldn't be home until eight o'clock. My dinner was in the fridge, I could heat it up in the microwave, just put the plate in and press the button. She'd already set the timer. Beside the note was a card from the health centre saying she had an appointment at half-two that afternoon. When I was finished my dinner I took the mash out for the hens. Their eyes blinked as they looked at me. When I tipped out the contents of the bowl, they sprinted towards me and pecked and squabbled as they tossed bits of their food into the air.

I went upstairs to do my homework. I puzzled over it for an hour, turning from one side to the other every few minutes, until I flicked over the last page and I only had five more sums to do. To celebrate I put Nevermind into the stereo. I turned it up loud and tapped the pencil in time to the music as I figured the numbers. I used an extravagant hand for the last one and drew a smiley face before shutting the jotter. I stood up and frowned at my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. I growled like a dog, showing my teeth. Then I straightened my face and winked. 'All right doll?' I said as if I'd just bumped into Fiona. I leaned close to the glass and pressed gently on the marks on my nose that could turn into spots. They seemed kind of clear today so I smiled at myself and went back down to the living room.

I watched the telly until my mammy came in. She told me she'd been round to visit Andrew.

'How was school today?' she asked.

'Just the usual.'

I got back to the programme. It was about the first moon landings and how the Americans employed Nazi scientists that should have been tried for war crimes, but weren't. The commentator said that they'd used slave labour from the death camps, and that if they hadn't been so useful to the allies they would have been hung like the others. As he said this, the screen was filled with camp victims piled in mounds, skinny legs all twisted round each other like pipe cleaners.

'Turn that over,' said my mammy.

'But it's interesting,' I said. 'You're always telling me to find interesting things.'

‘I don’t care,’ she said. ‘We see enough death and destruction without bringing it into the house.’

‘Oh mammy,’ I said. But I got up and was about to turn it over when she told me to switch it off. I tutted and she told me she had to speak to me about something.

‘What is it now?’

She turned her eyes to me and for a second I wondered if she was going to burst out crying, but then a firm look came over her.

‘I need to have a word with you.’

I looked at her and swallowed. ‘What have I done this time?’

‘It’s not you son.’

I felt relieved for a couple of seconds, but her sad expression scared me.

‘I was at the doctor earlier,’ she said. ‘They tell me I’ve got.’ She paused before she said it.

‘Cancer.’

I repeated it. As the word left my mouth she nodded slowly, like I’d just answered a hard question and was close to getting it right.

‘Do you have to get radiotherapy or something?’

‘The doctor says it’s went past that.’

The words wormed their way into my brain.

‘I’ve not got long,’ she said.

I looked round the room. The curtains. The picture of my da on the mantelpiece. The poker lying next to the fire. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘They say it’ll be weeks rather than months.’

I slumped back into my chair and stared at her. She looked into my eyes. ‘Suzanne’s coming home on Saturday,’ she said. ‘We can sit down together and have a talk about what’s going to happen. Who you’re going to live with.’

‘I’m staying here,’ I said and pointed at the floor.

‘You can’t,’ she said. ‘You’re too young.’

I couldn’t think of a reply, so I ran up the stairs and went into the bathroom, sliding the bolt into the latch. I sat on the pan and stared at the dark marks of mould that curled from the corner of the ceiling. The stairs creaked. Then there was a knock at the door.

‘Jamie.’

I got up and undid the lock. She came into the room and put her arms up. 'Come here to your mammy,' she said and I folded myself into her body. I tried to tell her I didn't want her to go, that I would miss her, that the last thing in the world I wanted was not to see her anymore. Nothing came out but tears. They brimmed in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks and onto her jumper. Then sobs came up from my chest and racked through my body.

'We all have to go sometime,' she said. 'I've had a good life. I met your da. I brought up two lovely children. Both of you are doing well with your lives. What else could I want out of it?'

'A wee bit more.'

'That's one of the troubles with the world,' she said. 'Everybody wants more. Nobody seems to know when they've had enough.'

'Just a couple or three years.'

'And what about when they were up?' she said. 'It would be another couple.'

'I don't want you to go.'

She brushed her hand through my hair. 'I know, I know.'



## Chapter Five

As I walked down the main street I noticed that a couple more shops were boarded up. The one where my uncle Andrew got his first coloured telly had a 'for rent' sign in the window. I turned into the granite path next to the statue. I looked at the two crossed swords when I passed. They rested against the bare legs of a man in a kilt. Underneath him was a plaque that said Battlefield, 1745. My mammy had told me it was put up to honour of one of the fights won by the Jacobites. She thought it was funny they'd built it in Stony Cross when you considered how much of a proddy town it was.

I could hear her laugh as the doors whished open. I stepped across the shiny floor and saw Fiona standing under the clock. She was wrapped up in a grey coat. Her boots made her feet look small and cute. She smiled when she saw me and linked her arm into mine when we walked into the cafe. The place was empty except for a security guard eating a roll and some old Judy hunched over a bowl of soup. 'I don't know how it makes any money,' said Fiona as I pushed a tray up the shelf. We pointed at cakes and sandwiches, but weren't that hungry so we didn't bother. A fat woman waited at the counter. She had her hands on her hips. I ordered a raspberry milk shake for me. Fiona asked for a chocolate one. The woman foamed them up and popped a straw in the top.

We took our tray to a table in the corner. Somebody had left a paper on it. The headline said, 'Regeneration'. Fiona picked it up and we read about the plans the development agency had for Stony Cross. Apparently we were a deprived area with high unemployment and dangerous industrial waste. The corporation had secured a grant from the European Union and they were going to clean the pit yard up and build a couple of factory units. Our M.P. said he was pleased that all his efforts had paid off, and he hoped the influx of capital would kick start the local economy. One of the councillors said he hoped they would do more than paper over the cracks. There was enough funding to build something that would move us towards a resolution of the cultural divide that threatens our community.

Fiona nodded as she looked at it. 'This was on the telly last month,' she said. 'My da told me the whole area round our scheme is going to be different.' She turned the page and pointed to a plan. 'This'll be a play park, with a rubber floor, and a fence round it so dogs can't shite in it.'

‘And a bench for all the mummies.’

‘They’ll sit there with their fat bellies,’ she said. ‘Push chairs filled with messages, and fags smoking away on the end of their fingers.’

‘Moaning about the telly.’

‘And their husbands.’

‘And at night it’ll be the Young Team.’

‘Drinking wine and smashing bottles against the swings,’ she said.

‘Marking time until they get girlfriends.’

‘And when they do,’ she said. ‘They’ll get them pregnant in a matter of weeks.’

‘Then they’ll come in the daytime with their weans.’

‘And the broken glass will still be there.’

‘And jag one of the snottory bastards on the leg.’

We started to laugh. It soon turned into a full on giggle that didn’t stop until we were both breathless. I wiped the tears from my eyes and glanced at the security guard and the old woman and the canopy that hung over the coffee machine. Then I turned to Fiona and gazed into her eyes. The stillness between us was empty and full at the same time.

The door to the café opened and a draft blew along the floor. I saw it tugging at a bit of a napkin then curling it into the edge of the counter. I felt it wafting against my neck and into my hair. It made me think of my mammy’s fingers.

You can be such a scruffy boy, I heard her say.

‘I’m going to miss her,’ I said.

Fiona’s forehead wrinkled. ‘How’s she doing?’

I sucked at my shake until it was empty and rattled like a pair of cancerous lungs. I moved the straw round, Hoovering the scummy bits hanging on the side of the glass. Then I stopped and looked back at her. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘You just need to keep your chin up,’ she said.

‘But.’

She reached across the table and grabbed my hands. ‘Not for you,’ she said. ‘For her.’

## Chapter Six

We marched beside the navy blue boards until we came to a lorry parked half on the pavement. Stretching past it was a line of empty posts, buttressed and waiting for the sheets of plywood a gang of men were unloading. We kept moving until we were out of sight of the workers. Then we cut into the yard. The smell of fire and oil hit my nose as we ran through the scrub and nettles. We skipped over fallen branches and tufts of grass, like we were soldiers on a sortie deep in enemy territory, dodging a bike frame, a shopping trolley, and a car radiator. Plastic bags filled with rubbish, split open by cats, and strewn over the broken concrete and brickwork. A half crushed caravan with torn curtains hanging out of a broken window.

When we reached the bridge Tommy held up his hand like he was the officer. He pushed his head round the corner so he could see down the road. His body seemed to make a few starts before he pounced. I heard the sound of tyres screeching. I followed him out and got a vision of Duncan's angry face. He was shouting. 'What the fuck are you playing at? I could have ran you down you stupid cunt.'

We climbed into the motor. Duncan twisted round and asked if I was all right. He started on about my mammy, and if there was anything he could do and all the rest of the stuff that everyone's being saying to me. I just nodded and mumbled thanks and that.

When he was finished his speech, he told Tommy to put his seat belt on. 'You as well,' he said to the mirror. Then he switched the gear changer into drive and pressed the accelerator. It was the first time I'd been in an automatic. It felt like an American car. I bounced my arse up and down in the seat.

'It's comfy.'

'Certainly is,' said Tommy. 'It's that big you can spread yourself around.'

'Like a couch in here,' I said.

Tommy glanced over his shoulder. 'You could be a lord or something. Lying in the drawing room, waiting for the butler to bring in a bottle of sherry.'

'Port actually,' I said in an English accent. 'Hudson, be a good man and fetch me a bottle of the 1887 Peach Melba.'

Tommy started to laugh. It set me off too. Before long I forgot what we were giggling at, but I couldn't stop.

‘What’s so funny about that?’ asked Duncan. I pushed my face against the coldness of the window in an effort not to laugh, but after a few seconds I sneaked a look at Tommy and the two of us were off again. Duncan sat at the wheel, his red face staring straight ahead. ‘You’ve been smoking,’ he said. ‘Haven’t you?’

‘Chill out brother,’ said Tommy.

‘Don’t be giving me any of that hippy chatter,’ said Duncan. ‘You lazy bastard, laying around all day while I’m at fucking work.’

‘That’s your choice,’ said Tommy.

‘Aye Duncan,’ I said and burst out giggling.

‘What’s so funny?’ he said before looking at me in the mirror. ‘Are you coming the cunt?’

The laughter left me as fast as it had appeared. All I felt was an emptiness that started to fill with images of my mammy lying in bed, twisting in her sheets, begging the doctor to give her something, please doctor give me something. And my uncle sitting there, not being able to do anything but hold her hand and watch.

I blinked the images out of my brain and tried to concentrate on the road. The car glided over the canal bridge and Duncan turned it towards Glasgow. After a while we had to slow for an old woman driving a mini. It was a while before the oncoming traffic eased with Duncan getting close behind her going, ‘Come on, come on.’ When it was clear he hit the throttle. The power kicked in and we slid past her as quick as you like. I was impressed by the acceleration and the sound of the exhaust.

‘It’s a smooth ride,’ I said. ‘What size an engine has she got?’

‘Three litre.’

I looked around the interior before flicking open the ashtray then closing it. I snapped the magazine holder on the back of Tommy’s seat and the smell of leather came at me again. Fucking luxury, I thought. It was like a limousine. I’d never been in one of them before. Although I’d probably be in one soon enough. One of those funeral cars. I’d sit in the back with a suit on and a black armband. My head would be leaning against the rain-streaked window. When we got to the cemetery, Suzanne would grab my hand and give it a squeeze. We’d walk through the grass and they’d lower my mammy into a wet grave.

Duncan turned the radio on and a blast of jazz hit my ears. He flicked the stations until Oasis’s ‘Live Forever’ came on.

‘Can I make a spliff?’ asked Tommy.

‘Are you kidding me?’ said Duncan. ‘If Billy was to find out he’d give us all a kick in the arse.’

‘He couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure if I was you,’ said Duncan. ‘Old Billy’s had rucks with people all round the world, and in Belfast. How do you think he got that big bent nose? He wasn’t born like that.’

‘All that means is that someone gave him a battering once.’

‘Any more of your pish,’ said Duncan. ‘And I’ll give you one.’

‘You and whose army?’

Duncan gave him a hard dig on the thigh. Tommy lifted his hand, but suddenly seemed to think better of it. I was glad because I’d seen them fighting before. Duncan usually won because he was older and stronger, but once or twice Tommy had gotten the better of him.

Glasgow was grey and wet. We drove through a street that was sided by hoardings and industrial units. As we passed a shop, a man in a green and white shirt walked through its door. He had a roll-up in his mouth and a plastic bag hanging from his hand. Duncan peeped the horn.

When the man looked, we gave the cunt the fingers.

Further down the road Celtic Park appeared behind a boarded-up school. Duncan rolled the windows down and we started shouting, ‘UDA all the way, fuck the pope and the IRA.’ A group of people were getting out of a minibus in the car park. They turned to stare, one of them shaking his fist.

Duncan pushed on the accelerator and we flew past two sets of traffic lights and another industrial unit. Eventually we arrived at Bridgeton Cross. He pointed to a bandstand in the middle of the square. It was made out of cast iron and had a clock on top of it. ‘That’s where the Billy Boys used to hang out,’ he said.

I imagined a gang of men slouched against the pillars, flat caps on at an angle, scars on their cheeks and noses bent. Want a picture? they would have said to us. Maybe one of them would have drawn his finger across his throat and called us a bunch of doonhamers or sheep shaggers.

‘They used to be the toughest gang in the whole of the town,’ said Duncan. He said it with pride. As if he had stood with them, ready for the Fenian hordes that travelled across from the South side.

The Lodge was a section of tenements. It towered over a wasteland like it was the last man standing after a gang fight who was just managing to stay on his feet. It had a big blue sign across the front that said, Olympia House. A bush was growing out of the brickwork next to the roof. Pigeon shit stained the wall next to a drainpipe.

Duncan took an orange folder from the glove box. 'I'll be ten minutes,' he said. His close-cropped head was tucked down and his shoulders swung as he walked up the steps.

I turned to look at Tommy. 'Are you a member?'

'I can't be fucked with all that,' he said. 'There's more to life than wearing a suit and a sash.'

'It's meant to be handy for getting jobs and that.'

'So they keep telling me.'

A couple of men walked up the street. They were a bit better dressed than the other people we'd seen. They could have been evangelists on a mission to save some poor sinner. They nodded to each other as they stepped into the Lodge. I thought it was probably like being a member of a secret society, a club where they helped each other when things were rough. And it would be a good laugh to play the flute and march like soldiers through the streets of Belfast. With a drum major at the head of the procession, all the lampposts hanging with Union Jacks, and crowds of people watching, cheering us on as their faces reddened under the July sun.

'Shall we have some music?' I said, pointing to a pile of tapes underneath the stereo.

'Like we'll find something decent here,' he said. He pulled one out and showed it to me. 'Check this shite.'

It had a picture of some pipers with kilts on and bearskin hats.

He clicked it in and turned the volume up. The bagpipes came out, and I wanted to laugh, but at the same time I felt some kind of shiver going up my back. It was like they were calling me to war against the English, or some other foreign cunt that was trying to take away our land. I started to drum the back of Duncan's seat, and I noticed Tommy was doing the same to the dashboard.

'This is all right,' I said.

'It sure is,' he said. 'Come on the Scotland.'

We got back to Billy's house at one o'clock. Tommy got out to open the gate and we rolled over the ruts of the drive. Duncan told us to wipe our feet when he put the key in the door. He picked the post up off the carpet and put it on a stand next to a huge mirror. Lots of shoes were piled at the bottom of the staircase. A Rangers scarf hung near the top of the banister. It clashed with the green carpet and the magnolia walls. Duncan nudged me into the kitchen. He put the kettle on as we munched into the pies we got on the way home. I was impressed by the size of the place. It was even bigger than Suzanne's.

We went into the lounge and piled onto the couch. It was one of them leather ones like you get in a magazine. Duncan put a video on. The telly was massive. But the film was shite so I started to check out the room. There was pictures hanging on the walls. They had gold frames and lights were pointed at them. The curtains were velvet. The drinks cabinet was stacked out with bottles.

After a few minutes Tommy tutted and sighed.

'What's up with you?' asked Duncan.

'Is there not something else to watch?'

Duncan got up and pressed the eject button. When the tape came out he put it in its case and back on the shelf. He stood and looked at the selection. Then he bent down in front of a cabinet. He turned to us as he opened the drawer.

'If I show you this,' he said. 'You can't tell anybody.'

'Is it a porno?' asked Tommy as he licked his lips.

'Is it fuck,' said Duncan. He frowned as he looked at me. 'This is from Ulster. Do you want to see it?'

I sat forward until I was on the edge of the cushion. 'Put it on then.'

The video flickered and buzzed for a minute. Music started, a martial tune played by a flute and a snare drum. Different images flashed across the screen, a double-decker bus on fire, a Land Rover bouncing over rubble scattered in the road, and paratroopers herding people with their rifles. Then it was a street on a summer's day. A band marched past with young men on drums. They wore royal blue uniforms. Just as the pipe major twirled his baton high into the air, a shop window blew out in a wave of smoke and glass that scattered the parade. The film cut to the aftermath. A fire engine with flashing lights. The sound of sirens. Shop and car alarms. Soldiers helping people walk. A screaming wean, covered in blankets being rushed into the back of an ambulance.



The screen went blank and a man started talking. A scene from the countryside faded in as he spoke about the Provisionals and their reign of terror. The Protestant people will have to stand together to beat them. The Westminster government have become complacent about terrorism with all this talk of a ceasefire, but we men and women of Ulster have a much longer experience of Nationalist atrocities. They will not find it so easy to draw the wool over our eyes.

Duncan was engrossed in the film. Tommy turned to me. 'The pope is a whore of Babylon,' he said in an Ian Paisley voice.

We started laughing, until Duncan got up and clicked off the video. 'If you're not going to take it seriously.'

'Can we not watch a porno or something?' asked Tommy.

'You're controlled by your knob,' said Duncan. But he rummaged in the drawer until he found another tape. It was about this man who was acting as if he was a little boy. He had a cap on and a pair of shorts. He was playing basketball on the street and he accidentally lobbed the ball into this woman's garden. When he tried to sneak in to fetch it, she came out and caught him.

'I know her,' said Tommy.

'Shut up,' said Duncan.

'I do,' said Tommy.

'Where from?' I asked.

'She's in one of my dad's magazines,' he said. 'Her name's Flora and she comes from Minnesota.'

'Aye right.'

'Want a bet?'

'How much?'

'A pound.'

'You're on.'

As we were shaking hands Duncan told us to be quiet. Flora was sitting on the arm of a couch and the boy was splayed out on the cushions. She reached for his tee-shirt and lifted it up. Then she dragged her fingernails down his belly. The boy acted as if he was shy. I glanced over at Tommy and noticed he was rubbing his hand on his crotch. 'Pack that in you pervert.'

'That's disgusting,' said Duncan.

'I'm only doing what comes natural.'



Flora leaned over the boy and kissed him on the stomach. She purred as she tugged his shorts off and his cock popped out.

‘Would you look at the size of that,’ said Tommy.

It was huge. Mine started to get bigger as Flora kissed it, then slipped it into her mouth. The whole lot.

‘How does she do that?’ asked Tommy.

‘You’d think it would make her gag,’ said Duncan.

I didn’t say anything. I thought of her doing it to me, squirming around and rubbing her hands all over my chest. Then she would lie back on the couch and beg me to put it in her.

The phone rang and interrupted us. Duncan rushed over to the video and turned it off. He told us to be quiet before he answered the call.

‘Hello.’

‘Aye, I’ll be there in an hour.’

‘Who was that?’ asked Tommy.

‘Billy,’ said Duncan. ‘You two need to go now. I’ve got stuff to do.’

Tommy put his hand on his hip and acted as if he was vacuum cleaning the carpet. ‘Housework?’

Duncan lifted his hand as if to give him a clip. ‘Billy’s got somebody to do that,’ he said. ‘And it isn’t me.’ He paused then went on. ‘If you want to know, I’ve got to pick him up from the airport.’

‘Where’s he been?’

‘Never you mind,’ said Duncan.

‘Probably Belfast,’ I said.

‘How did you know?’

‘It’s obvious.’

‘Aye,’ said Tommy. ‘It’s obvious.’

‘Shut up,’ said Duncan. He picked the keys off the shelf. ‘Where shall I drop you off?’

Tommy turned to me. ‘Do you want to come round mine?’ he said. ‘I’ll show you that magazine.’

Jock was lying on the couch having a sleep. Tommy put his hands to his lips and nodded me to the stairs. We climbed them quietly, and went into the room at the front

of the house. It smelled of that talcum old women wear, and their perfume. The bed had a pink spread on it that reached the floor. Tommy ducked his head under. He dragged out a cardboard box. He took the lid off. Then he pulled out a pair of bleached jeans and an old shirt.

‘My da was a skinhead back in the old days,’ he said as he took out a scooter catalogue. ‘This is his memory lane box.’

Beneath a brochure about Spanish holidays, was a glossy cover with Fiesta written on it. There was a blonde woman with a swimming costume on. She was pretty tasty, but she wasn’t Flora. Tommy frowned as he checked through the magazines. ‘Aha,’ he said and separated one from the pile. It was a Rustler. He handed it to me. On the front page was Flora. She was naked from the waist up. Bending towards the camera, she smiled as if she’d just heard a dirty joke. Her eyes were green and smoky. I turned to the contents and saw that she was in pages 32-39. I could feel the blood move to my knob as I started to flick through. Images of the boy getting sucked off were flashing into my mind.

But, before I got to the pictures of Flora, the lavvy flushed. I nearly shat myself. I turned to look at Tommy. His eyes were wide. ‘That’s my dad,’ he whispered. He carefully packed the box and slid it back under the bed. Then he grabbed the magazine and we crept out the room, closing the door like we were burglars. As we crossed the hallway, Jock shouted from the bathroom. ‘Is that you, son?’

‘Aye.’

‘When did you come in?’

Tommy gave me the magazine and pushed me towards his bedroom. I sat on the floor and had a quick look at Flora. I was opening the pages when I heard the bolt sliding back on the toilet door. I tucked the magazine under my bum just as Tommy backed into the room. Jock followed him.

‘What’s going on?’

‘We’ve just came in out the rain.’

He frowned as if he couldn’t quite work out what we were up to. ‘Do you boys want a cuppa?’

‘Aye,’ I said.

‘I’ll go and get the kettle on,’ he said. He turned to Tommy. ‘Come down in a minute and you can make the tea.’

When he was gone, Tommy whispered. 'I thought we were in for it,' he said. Then he dropped his voice to a whisper. 'Where is it?'

I looked into his eyes. 'Can I take a loan of it?'

He glanced at the door. 'Aye, all right then,' he said. 'But make sure you don't spunk on it.' He stuck his hand out. 'And mind you owe me a pound.'

Jock lit up a fag. He asked me if I wanted one.

'I don't smoke.'

'Clever boy,' he said. He had a puff and flicked the ash. 'So how are you doing son?'

'OK.'

'Are you sure?' he said. Then he started with the speech about my mammy. He said he'd phoned to tell her I was welcome to stay round here anytime there was a need. As he spoke, I started to bubble.

'You let yourself greet son,' he said. 'There would be something wrong if you didn't.' He got up off his seat and settled down next to me on the couch. He put his arm round my shoulder and patted it like I was a dog. He had another draw on his fag and told me about when his mammy died. It was like something had been torn out his chest, he said, but in time the pain had eased. And he was sure it would for me. He knew I most likely wouldn't want to talk about it, but if I ever did, he would always spare five minutes for me. As he talked, smoke from his fag curled up from his fingers to my face, tickling my nose and itching my eyes. I tried to pull my head away but he held me closer, saying 'poor wee laddie.'

I managed to get away from him when the living room door banged open and Tommy came in with a tray. On it was tea and chocolate biscuits. 'Here comes the refreshments,' said Jock. He took a cup. 'Ta son.'

He went to a cupboard at the side of the fireplace and brought out a packet of cards, a biro, and a notepad. As he dealt the first hand, I had a look at the pictures on the wall. One was a scroll from the Loyal Orange Order, saying he was an honourable member. The other was a knitted pattern of crossed flags that had Stony Cross and Shankill Road written underneath them.

I gathered my cards up. It was a good hand. I threw my first one down and tried not to come across too smug.

'How was our Duncan today?' Jock asked Tommy.

‘Fucking moody.’

‘He’s been like that for a while,’ said Jock. ‘I think he’s under pressure since he’s applied for promotion at the Lodge.’

Tommy turned to me and winked. ‘That’s why he’s running around kissing arses on his day off.’

‘It’s a shame you’ve not got the same gumption yourself.’

‘I’m a lover, not a fighter’, said Tommy.

‘You’re a lazy bastard.

I put my last card down. ‘That’s me out.’

Tommy nodded and his daddy started to gather up the pack. He shuffled them, but kept up the sniping.

‘It’s time you got a fucking job.’

‘I’m trying.’

‘No hard enough,’ said Jock. ‘The Lodge could help you out there.’

‘But they’re a shower of fannies.’

I half listened to them as I had another look at the Orange Order scroll that hung over the fireplace. I thought about marching through the streets of Belfast, drums rattling and the pipes whistling.

‘So how do you join?’

‘You?’ said Jock with a snort. ‘Your uncle would have a fit if you even thought about it.’

Tommy nodded. ‘He would as well.’

Jock passed me the pack. ‘It’s your deal son.’

## Chapter Seven

We passed under an aqueduct, a series of five arches that held the canal over the river, a road, and the railway track. Billy pointed to the pattern of bricks that seemed to clash with the turn of the curve. 'Now that is an impressive bit of work,' he said.

Duncan asked his dad about it and Jock demonstrated with his interlocked fingers how the weight of the canal pushes the arch together.

'Who would have built it?' I asked.

'Mostly farm workers from Ireland who weren't making enough money to feed their families,' said Billy.

Jock interrupted to say something about the religion of the men who worked on the canal. The Catholics were more the labouring class, and the Protestants the skilled tradesmen, he said. He and Billy started talking about the immigration of the Irish and how much they'd contributed to Scotland.

'Blah, blah, blah,' said Tommy out of the side of his mouth. It made me giggle. I had to lean my head down to stop. I heard Jock going what are they laughing at, and Duncan saying they were always at it, then Billy going, well it's good they've got something that gives them pleasure that doesn't involve sniffing glue, or taking drugs.

'It's a modern curse,' he said. 'Our children are selling themselves into slavery for the price of a bag of heroin.'

As he spoke Tommy reached forward to the back of his seat and moved his hand up and down as if he was stroking a tiny dick. I burst out in more snottery laughing. Duncan reached over me and punched Tommy, 'Pack it in you two.'

'Leave them alone,' said Jock. 'You always take everything that serious. You need to lighten up a wee bit. We're going to the football. The boys are bound to be excited.' He turned to look at Tommy. 'And you. If you're that keen on fun, why don't you start us off with a wee song?'

There was a lot of people on the streets of Edinburgh. Some of them looked like tourists, cameras round their necks and stupid hats on. When we got to a junction a group of boys in green and white shirts were hanging off the pavement. Billy stopped. I could feel Tommy fidgeting beside me. The Hibernian supporters crossed in front of us, pushing and arguing with each other. They walked slowly. When the lights changed, Billy started to nudge forward. He peeped his horn. I was expecting

them to give us the fingers or shout some abuse or something. But they never, they stepped out of the way. Tommy leaned over me as if he was going to start, but his dad grabbed him by the shoulder and told him to behave.

We went up the road and turned next to a huge statue of a man on a horse. I told them we were near where Suzanne lived. Tommy said we should go round for a cup of tea, but I shook my head at him. 'They'll be in Stony Cross by now.'

'Just as well,' said Billy. 'She wouldn't want to see me anyway.'

'Why not?' asked Duncan.

Jock and Billy looked at each other before Billy coughed. 'She doesn't really like the Rangers,' he said. 'Or the Lodge.'

'On account of her man being a Catholic,' said Jock.

'Oh,' said Duncan. He looked at me and frowned as if he was pitying my whole family.

I didn't know what to say, so I kept my mouth shut.

Billy pulled into this square. There was a garden in the middle of it that had a padlocked gate. He parked the motor under a tree. He said we'd be hoofing it the rest of the way. It took us five minutes to get to Leith Walk. By then we were part of a crowd of Rangers supporters. We followed them into a road that twisted and narrowed. It was like a picture of the Grand Canyon, only the red walls had been blackened with years and years of soot. Easter Road stadium appeared in a flash of white with green spars holding it up. A line of police blocked our way. As we were herded towards the turnstiles, someone shouted 'go on you Orange bastards.' I looked up to see two lads hanging out of a window. Then they were dragged inside, and a woman looked out.

The game got off to a good start for Rangers. Our new player scored at ten minutes. Because he was a darkie, the Hibs fans screamed like monkeys every time he had the ball. Some of them even threw bananas.

'How are we expected to treat the Tims as equals,' asked Billy. 'When they fucking act like that?'

'He's a fenian as well,' said Duncan.

A couple of minutes into the second half and Hibs equalised. I'd been enjoying myself as well. The singing was making me forget everything about my mammy, but as soon as they scored we were fucking hushed. The game got a bit serious after that, the ball moving from one side of the pitch to the other. Tommy and

Duncan spent most of the time sitting forward, chewing their scarves. Then, when it was getting on for ninety minutes, Hibernian slotted in another. That was them two-one up. A few minutes later the ref blew the final whistle and the Hibs players ran about celebrating. Our lot slouched as they headed for the tunnel, getting told 'what a load of rubbish' as they disappeared towards the dressing rooms.

Tommy lit up a fag. As he blew out the smoke he sighed. Then he turned to me and his lips tightened. There was no humour in his eyes. Billy and Jock talked like they were television pundits.

'We didn't capitalise on our lead.'

'Did you see the way he got behind us?'

'We'll not win the league if we keep falling for that one.'

## Chapter Eight

The church hall echoed with the chords of the guitar. The singer leaned right into the microphone as he chanted about getting brought up in a scheme. Morag and Tommy nodded their head to the beat.

Fiona tugged at my arm. 'Shall we have a dance?'

'Maybe later,' I said. 'I want a puff first.'

Tommy put his hand on my shoulder as we went through the fire door and onto the green. I skinned one up and sucked the smoke deep into my chest. For a second I might have been on my own, staring at the yew tree in the corner. It towered over broken headstones as if it was protecting them from the weather. I wondered if any of the bodies underneath had flesh left on them, or were they just bones, with a wedding ring, and maybe even pennies balanced over the holes where their eyes used to be.

'Come on,' said Tommy. 'Hurry up with that.'

I passed the joint and pulled the bottle out of my jacket.

'You should take that stuff easy,' said Fiona with a nod to the vodka. She shook her head before she walked back into the hall. Morag followed her. I turned to see the door close behind them.

'What's the matter with her?'

'She's worried about you.'

'I'm just trying to enjoy myself, that's all.' I had another swig to prove I was still sober. I offered him the bottle but he wouldn't take it.

'Suit yourself.'

'It's freezing out here,' he said. 'I'm going back in.'

I turned away from him and gazed at the lawn. I remembered a time when I was a wee boy. There was a jumble sale and my mammy had put me on a pony that traipsed round the church. When she wanted to go inside, I'd followed her and made a fuss in front of her pals. She took me back out to the green and told me to stay there until she was finished. I sat for a while. But I soon got bored and went over to the drive to play with the stones. Then I started chucking them so they would bounce against the wall of the church. I threw them higher and harder until one of them smashed the stained glass windows. That brought her out. She appeared at the door, her face red and angry. She rushed for me and caught me as I tried to disappear into



the bushes. She yanked me by the arm and slapped me hard on the back of the legs. It stung, and I started greeting. The other women stood in the doorway with their arms folded over their chests. You should have seen how they were looking at me.

The band started a new song. I spat on the grass and went into the hall. The noise inside was ear splitting. Fiona was sitting on her own at the end of a bench. I sat beside her and put my arm on her shoulder. She looked at me and smiled, then spoke into my ear.

‘Shall we have a dance then?’

I glugged down the last of the bottle, then stood up and grabbed her by the hand. Soon, I was pulled into the song and my body flowed as if I had no control over it. Faster and faster I moved, holding onto her tighter and tighter until I eventually tripped and the two of us landed on the floor. She brushed her clothes as she got up, and looked at me as if I was disgusting. ‘Fiona,’ I shouted as I tried to stand, but I slipped again and fell back down. She pushed through some people and went into the toilets. When I eventually got to my feet, I ran after her and tried to barge in the door. But Tommy and Morag stopped me.

‘You can’t go in there.’

‘I need to talk to her.’

Tommy pushed me towards the fire exit. ‘Leave her alone,’ he said. ‘Just for a wee while till she calms down.’

‘But I love her.’

‘Shut up Jamie,’ he said. ‘You’ve only been with her for a couple of weeks.’

I stopped at the door. ‘It sometimes happens like that.’

‘Don’t make a fool of yourself like this.’

I turned round and staggered out into the cold. Tommy followed me and we sat on the steps.

‘I don’t feel well.’

‘You’ve had too much to drink.’

‘It’s more than that,’ I said. ‘It’s my mammy.’

He leaned my head against his shoulder. ‘Come here,’ he said. ‘It’s going to be all right.’

I pushed him away. ‘No it isn’t.’

He tried to cuddle me again, ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘I’m here for you.’

I struggled for a few seconds. Then I gave up and leant my face into his arm. 'When everything's sorted,' he said. 'Suzanne will get you away from here. You can move to Edinburgh and have the kind of life I'd love to have.'

I pushed away from him. 'My mammy's dying,' I said as I got to my feet. 'And all you can think about is how it might benefit me.'

Tommy stood up next to me. 'Come on Jamie,' he said. 'That's not what I meant.'

'Just leave me alone.'

He looked at me as if he was going to say something. Then he shook his head and went back into the hall. I stepped onto the grass next to the trees. I gazed at the green and red lights flashing through the windows. As the guitars got louder and the drums got quicker, I searched the ground for a stone.

## Chapter Nine

The table was set with the best cloth and arranged with my mammy's Royal Albert china. The crystal glasses were dusted and polished. Andrew settled into his chair, pulling at the cuffs of his shirt. He tapped the table with one of his knives before his fingers moved to his glass.

'What are we drinking?'

'You can have a beer,' said Michael.

'Wine not good enough for me?'

'Have what you like,' said Michael. 'I thought you'd prefer a beer.'

'Because I'm an old miner?'

'I'd rather have a beer myself,' said Michael. He bent to the fridge and brought out a can. 'I'm sure Jamie would like one?'

I looked at my mammy. Her face was drawn as if she was tired and harassed. She nodded at him, so he poured me a glass.

'Are you not getting me one?' asked Andrew.

Suzanne banged her hand on the table. 'For God sake,' she said. 'I thought you wanted wine.'

Andrew's face screwed up as he looked at her. 'What's wrong with you?'

Suzanne blew air through her cheeks. She shook her head. 'Nothing.' She frowned and rearranged her cutlery before looking at my mammy. 'Can we start on our food?' she asked. 'Before it gets cold.'

'Sorry hen,' said Andrew. 'I'll shut up.' He rubbed his stomach. 'I get a wee bit nippy some times when I'm hungry.' When he'd had a few mouthfuls he turned to my mammy. 'This is lovely Esther. Our Frank was a lucky bugger.'

Sophie lifted her face and smiled. 'Bugger,' she said as she picked up a bit of meat.

Suzanne tutted. 'Don't swear in front of her. She'll be saying it at school next.'

'Bugger, bugger,' said Sophie.

'Stop it,' said Suzanne as she shook Sophie by the wrist. She glowered at Andrew. Michael reached across the table and patted her on the back of the hand.

'The chicken's nice,' he said.

'Fresh,' said my mammy. 'I pulled it from the yard earlier.'

‘Fresh,’ said Sophie and poked at her plate.

‘Mammy,’ said Suzanne. She nodded towards Sophie.

‘She’ll need to find out where her food comes from sooner or later.’

‘But not while she’s eating it.’

‘Eating it,’ said Sophie.

‘See?’ said Suzanne.

‘See?’ said Sophie.

Her expression made us all laugh. I relaxed as I swilled down some of my beer. It was that nice I soon put away the rest of my glass. I looked at my mammy as I burped on the back of my hand.

‘Can I have another one?’

‘I think you’ve had enough.’

‘But mammy.’

‘He can share a can with me,’ said Michael. He pointed to the fridge. ‘Bring one over.’

‘You better not have too much yourself,’ said Andrew to Michael. ‘You don’t want to be over the limit when you take me home.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Michael. ‘We’ll get you a cab.’

My mammy reached across and patted Andrew on the shoulder. ‘Or you could stay here,’ she said. ‘There’s always room for you.’

‘You can have my bed,’ I said. ‘I’ll sleep on the couch.’

‘You’re a good lad,’ said Andrew. ‘You’ve been brought up well.’ He turned to my mammy. ‘He’s a credit to you hen.’

I saw Suzanne’s lips tightening as she jabbed her fork into a bit of chicken. The frown lines on her forehead reminded me of the beach after the tide’s gone out. She chewed and swallowed then dropped her cutlery on her plate. ‘I’ve had enough,’ she said before picking up her napkin.

Andrew leaned towards her. ‘What is it now?’

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I just lost my appetite.’

‘What’s the matter honey?’ asked Michael.

‘I said nothing,’ she said and picked up her glass. She swallowed the wine in a couple of gulps then refilled it.

‘Suze,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I think you should take it easy on the alcohol,’ he said. ‘We’ve a lot to talk about later.’

‘You don’t need to tell me that,’ she said.

Her accent was changing with the drink. Since leaving Stony Cross she’d started to talk as if she was always thinking what was to be said next. I could easily picture her in the advocate’s gown, making a speech in the courtroom. She was good at giving everybody the idea she was made from quality material. But it was all an act that fell away when she was upset or drunk. Then she sounded like one of the tough lassie’s at school.

‘What are you looking at?’ she said to me.

‘Nothing.’

‘Leave the boy alone,’ said Andrew.

‘What’s it to you?’ she said as she sat back down and got on with her dinner.

When we were finished eating, Michael and Suzanne took Sophie upstairs. As soon as they were gone Andrew started going on to my mammy about Edinburgh and was it the best thing for me to be brought up around a rake of champagne socialists. My mammy frowned when she realised I was listening. She told him to wheesh.

‘What’s a champagne socialist?’

‘Never you mind,’ she said.

‘Betrayers of the Labour movement,’ said Andrew. ‘That’s what they are.’

‘What did I tell you?’ she said. ‘Have I enough to worry about without you starting?’

He held up his glass. ‘Sorry hen, it’s the drink talking.’

‘If you can’t handle the effects, you shouldn’t be doing it.’

A smile stretched the side of his cheek, but he didn’t say anything because the stairs creaked with someone coming back down. He was settling into his chair, looking all innocent, when Suzanne walked into the room. She told us Sophie had gone down quite calmly for a change. Michael came in after her with more beer. He passed one to Andrew.

‘What did I say about the drink?’ said my mammy.

‘It’s only a can,’ said Andrew with a tut.

I turned to her. ‘Can I have one?’

‘You might as well,’ she said. ‘Everybody else is getting three sheets to the wind. In fact bring me through that wine.’

‘Don’t forget my glass,’ said Suzanne.

We put the telly on at ten o’clock to catch the news. There was a strike in a shipyard in the North of England. The employment secretary came on, standing in front of a picture of Big Ben. He said the union was being unreasonable and that the dispute could put the company out of business. Andrew booed as if he was at the pantomime.

Suzanne edged towards the front of her seat and started on Andrew with her opinions about the unions. It didn’t take them ten seconds to get into their usual argument about the Labour Party. I could hear Tommy in my ear saying ‘Blah blah blah’ as they wound each other up. Michael tried to get some words in, but he as stared down by both of them, so he sat back in his chair and gave me a smile. My mammy sat quietly. She frowned when the voices were raised, but she didn’t even look at them, she just stared into the distance.

Eventually they seemed to tire themselves out and shut up. Andrew picked up his beer and had a long swig. He licked his lips as he held it out in front of him. When he glanced at me and my mammy I could see that he was just getting started. He swung round to face Suzanne. ‘That cunt Blair will rape the Labour party and cast it aside when he’s finished with it,’ he said. ‘He’s a parasite.’ He then pointed his bottle at Suzanne. ‘And so is every fucker that supports him.’

‘Parasites?’ she said. ‘Parasites are the ones that get taken care of all their fucking lives.’

‘And what’s wrong with a country that does for those that can’t do for themselves?’ asked Andrew. He looked at my mammy. ‘Is that not what civilisation is all about?’

She didn’t seem to know what to say. Neither did I.

‘But it’s not just the needy that claim benefits,’ said Suzanne. ‘It’s all the rest.’ Her face went hard. ‘The sponging bastards should take responsibility for themselves.’

‘What, like you have?’ There was a look in Andrew’s eye that made me focus on what was being said.

‘I work damn hard for what I’ve got.’

‘And take care of your responsibilities?’

‘Of course she does,’ said Michael.

Andrew nodded at me. ‘What really?’

‘Andrew,’ said my mammy. Her face was more alive than it had been all evening.

‘Sorry hen,’ said Andrew. ‘But this is getting beyond a joke. Home truths sometimes need airing.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Suzanne. ‘Forget it.’

‘Forget it?’ said Andrew. ‘Is that your idea of taking responsibility.’

Michael got out of his chair. ‘Stop this.’

‘It’s too fucking late for that,’ said Andrew.

I looked at Suzanne but she sighed and slumped in her seat. My mammy turned to Andrew. ‘Turn the television off,’ she said.

‘No,’ said Suzanne.

‘We should get it out,’ said my mammy. ‘There’s no time like the present.’

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

My mammy and Suzanne both spoke at the same time.

‘Nothing,’ said Suzanne.

‘We need to tell you something,’ said my mammy.

I glanced at them both and then at Michael.

‘What is it with these two?’

Michael coughed into his hand and started to speak, stuttering a bit. ‘I think Esther should tell you.’

‘Tell me what?’ I was getting worried now. I already knew she had cancer. There couldn’t be anything worse than that.

My mammy’s eyes crinkled as if she was putting a plaster on my grazed knees. She got up and came over and sat on the arm of my chair. She put her hand on my arm.

‘You’ve always been my son,’ she said. ‘And you always will be my son.’

My mind whirled. I could see them all looking at me. Suzanne chewed her lip. Andrew gripped his can of beer.

‘Am I adopted or something?’

My mammy nodded. Then she said, ‘But you’re mine.’

‘How can I be if I’m somebody else’s?’

‘Since you were a baby,’ she said as her hand moved up my arm and gripped my shoulder. ‘I’ve held you.’ She shook me gently. ‘I’ve cleaned up after you and I’ve taken you to school.’

I shrugged away from her. ‘How could you keep this from me?’

‘I was going to tell you when you were sixteen,’ she said. ‘Your daddy and I agreed that would be the best time.’

‘But with what’s happening,’ said Andrew.

‘We needed to tell you earlier,’ said Michael.

‘If I’m not yours,’ I said. ‘Where did I come from?’

Her eyes were a watery greyness. They reminded me of a daytrip we’d had once to the highlands. The clouds had swirled and blackened over the heather of a glen. A cold rain had lashed her as she’d held her coat over my head.

She tightened her lips and nodded. Then she took a deep breath and opened her mouth to speak. But Suzanne interrupted her.

‘You’re mine.’



Part Two

# Winter

## Chapter Ten

The queue in the chippy was long with pupils. A fifty-pence bit dug into my palm as I waited. A boy came through the door and scowled. His name was Plunk. He was short and wiry and a couple of years younger than me. He caught my eye and nodded. Then he tried to get in front of me.

‘Wait your turn,’ I said as I pushed him out.

He looked at me, calm and serious. ‘You’re claimed.’

Everyone went silent at his words. Eyes circled me like wolves.

‘Come on then,’ he said.

The man leaned over the counter and pointed at Plunk. ‘Leave him alone.’

‘Shut it you old cunt,’ said Punk. ‘Right?’

‘Get out my shop,’ said the man.

‘Stick it up your arse,’ said Plunk as he was leaving. He turned to me when he reached the door. He drew his finger over his throat. ‘You’re in for it.’

My stomach was churning so much I could hardly give my order. The man wrapped them up and handed them over. ‘Don’t you worry,’ he said. ‘Boys like that are cowards.’

I grabbed the packet and walked out of the shop. I half expected to get jumped there and then. I was glad to bump into Fiona and Morag.

‘Give’s a chip,’ said Fiona.

We sat on the bench inside the bus shelter. The smell of vinegar hit me when I opened the bag. It made me want to boak. The lassies had a few each as I told them what had happened. Morag said Plunk was an idiot. He’d probably scurry back to the playground and would have forgotten about it by the next time I saw him. I shouldn’t bother myself. Fiona told me to eat some chips. The first couple were hard work, but I soon got my appetite. When I was done I scrunched the paper up and put it in the bin.

As I started back for school, Fiona tucked her hand into my elbow. I was proud because she was lovely, her short skirt and black tights making her legs look thin and shapely. I was starting to realise she was a decent lassie as well. She’d forgiven me for the night in the church when I’d got drunk and made an arse of myself. But, apart from that, she really came through after my mammy’s funeral. She’d let me shag her once that night, and twice the next afternoon. She’d even supplied the Johnnies.

The thought of the shags made me forget all about Plunk. I swaggered past the co-op, checking out my reflection with the two lassies. We rounded the wall and the spiked iron railings. We were just coming up to the bins when I clocked Plunk and two other boys slouched against a fence. They stood up when they saw me. All three of them crossed the street. Plunk's face was twisted up and his arms were held out at the side.

'Big man are you?'

Morag turned to him. 'Why don't you just go?'

Plunk pointed at me. 'Hiding behind a woman's skirt?'

'Fuck off you wee prick,' said Morag.

Plunk closed on her. 'Who are you calling a prick?' He turned to look at his pals, then back to Morag. 'You fucking whore.'

'Aye maybe,' she said. 'But I'm not as cheap as your ugly old dog of a ma.'

Plunk clenched his fist. Morag stuck her jaw forward. 'Go on, I dare you,' she said. 'I'm sure Tommy will want to know who gave me a black eye.'

Plunk's expression changed. 'I wouldn't hit you really,' he said. 'I was only kidding, wasn't I?'

Morag pointed her thumb up the road. 'Well go on then,' she said. 'Leave us alone.'

Plunk looked at me. 'I'll see you later.'

'Anytime,' I said, as if I meant it.

I walked the rest of the way without saying anything. I half listened to Fiona and Morag talk about Oasis and whether Liam or Noel was the better looking. As they went on, I wished I was half as hard as one of them two.

After double English, I had to run for the toilets I was that desperate. I dropped my bag on the floor and fumbled for my zipper. As my piss rattled against the urinal, I heard the door creak open, but I didn't turn around. When I was finished, I shook myself off and went to wash my hands. Then I saw Plunk. He was emptying my stuff onto the floor.

'Not so cheeky now are you?'

'Give me that.'

'Why don't you take it?'

'Just hand it over.'

‘Have you any kite?’

‘No.’

‘Sweeties?’

‘No.’

He started to nudge at the pile of jotters with his toe. ‘What’s in here then?’

I tried to push him back, but he kicked and a couple of my books went skidding along the floor and through a puddle. I pulled the bag out of his hand.

‘You fucking idiot,’ I said.

‘What did you call me?’

I tried to look into his eyes, but couldn’t. ‘Nothing,’ I said.

He didn’t seem to move, but I smelt the pepper when he punched me on the nose. He hit me three times before I managed to wrap my arms round my face to protect myself. I felt more blows connect to my neck and body. Then someone shouted.

‘Stop.’

Hitler grabbed Plunk and held him by the back of his jumper. ‘What the hell is going on here?’

Plunk pointed at me. ‘He started on me sir. And I hadn’t done anything.’

I looked at Hitler. I tried to speak but only stuttered. Hitler shook me by the shoulder.

‘So?’

As I glanced at the pair of them, I noticed how small Plunk was. I had to swallow to stop myself from greeting. ‘He was hitting me sir,’ I said. ‘Honest he was.’

Plunk screwed his face up as he rubbed his head. ‘Only because he hit me first.’

I struggled against Hitler. ‘I never did.’

Hitler shook me again. ‘Enough.’

‘But sir,’ I said.

Plunk started crying. ‘He just started punching me.’

Hitler took us to see the Rector. He sat me on the bench outside while he took Plunk in first. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. There was some blood on it. Eventually, the door opened and Hitler came out with Plunk. The wee bastard smiled at me before slipping away. Hitler called after him. ‘Straight home now.’

‘Aye sir,’ said Plunk as the fire doors swung closed behind him.

Hitler looked at me. ‘You better come in.’

The Rector sat behind his desk. He told me that fighting in the toilets was totally unacceptable. I tried to tell them how it all happened but neither of them would listen. The Rector told me he was sorry about my mother and that it was likely to cause upset to a young man. And he realised there might be more to the case than meets the eye. But a boy of my calibre should know better. Like the other boy, I was being suspended for the rest of the day. He said I should take the opportunity to go home and think through what had happened.

Her name was carved below my da’s. I still couldn’t see them as my grandfather and grandmother. And Suzanne as my mammy. Thinking about it left a big hole inside me. I couldn’t describe it, but it was like being cut off from my family, like I was alone. An orphan left on a doorstep. An adopted child. A foundling. A bastard.

And who the fuck was my real da?

Nobody would say. Andrew reckoned it was some guy that Suzanne used to hang about with when she was at school. Suzanne said I didn’t want to know. Michael looked away and said it wasn’t his business to tell me.

Nobody else knew. Except whoever my da was.

It started to rain. Not heavy drops, just a drizzle that coated my blazer in a sheen of wetness. I hunched forward and stared at the gravestone.

‘Why did you not tell me?’

As I put my fingers on her name, I wished I’d had a proper da. He’d have shown me how to fight and that. Then, when I was waiting in the queue at the chippy I’d be able to stand up for myself. I looked from the grave and saw the cross of the war memorial. Five of the names were related to me. Maybe even more through my real da. The solid granite stood to attention, telling everybody that the men of Stony Cross were willing to lay down their lives for the country.

How come I wasn’t brave like they were?

As I asked the question, I got a sense of a man sitting next to me. Maybe it was my da, maybe it was one of my ancestors. I imagined a hand gripping my shoulder. The touch of it filled me with confidence. All I needed to do was believe in myself. I was only wee Jamie MacGregor because I let myself. I could just as easily be a tough guy called Jimmy Mac.

‘Jimmy Mac,’ I said in the quiet of the cemetery.

I thought back to the chip shop. I’m in the queue and Plunk pushes in. Jimmy puts his hand on the scrawny wee neck.

What do you think you’re doing pal?

Plunk turns. He realises who he’s fucking dealing with. His eyes flicker because he’s shitting himself.

I’m sorry.

Jimmy smiles and shakes his head. He’s tough and that, but he’s not a bully.

Wait your turn like everyone else.

I reached for this flower that was flopping in a vase next to the headstone. It was a white rose. I picked at the petals, yanking them and letting them fall in a pile on the grass. I thought about the fight in the toilets, Plunk coming in and scattering my jotters on the floor. Jimmy Mac frowns as he looks at him. He doesn’t want to punch him because he’s only wee. And he’s awfully young. But the boy attacks him. Jimmy’s that surprised, Plunk gets a couple of good punches in before Jimmy even starts to duck and sway. But, then he pounces. He sees fear in the boy’s eyes as he grabs for the wee cunt. Plunk tries to duck out of the way but Jimmy catches him by the collar. He wraps his fingers into it, and slams the boy against the wall. Plunk gets him on the side but Jimmy doesn’t even feel it. His body surges with pure anger as he starts to smash punches into Plunk’s face.

I heard somebody coming. I lifted my head to look. I was expecting to see one of the greenkeepers or somebody. But I got a surprise. It was Billy. He smiled at me when he noticed me looking at him.

‘In trouble I hear.’

‘How did you know?’

‘Andrew gave me a bell,’ he said. He looked at the headstone. ‘I thought you might come here.’ He patted me on the shoulder. ‘So what happened?’

I picked at the grass. ‘He hit me first,’ I said. ‘So I punched him back.’

‘It’s good to stand up for yourself.’

I got to my feet. I could feel a blush rising from my neck. ‘I’m in for it when I got home.’

‘You were only defending yourself.’

The blush got deeper. ‘But the boy was younger than me.’

‘So fucking what?’ said Billy. ‘He was behaving like a cunt. So he deserves to get treated like one.’

‘I hope that’s what Andrew will say.’

As we walked towards the archway, my mind was full of the battle between Jimmy and Plunk. The more I thought about it the more I realised there wouldn’t have been one if I’d been somebody like Jimmy. Boys like Plunk wouldn’t pick on me. They wouldn’t even look at me. They’d come into the toilet and nod and have a pish and then go on their way without saying anything.

I looked at Billy. ‘How am I supposed to fight with guys like that?’

Billy held up his fist. ‘Just get fucking into them.’

‘But how though?’

‘Do you want me to take you to the boxing?’

I nodded and looked towards the road. I saw myself as Jimmy Mac, running along the pavement with a man on a bike telling him to jab, jab. I couldn’t stop smiling.

## Chapter Eleven

The guy on the door signed us in. We went through the back to the gym. It stunk of sweaty feet. The air was that cold I could see my breath. The trainer's belly hung over his waistband. He was standing in front of a mirror holding a boy's fists up. He smiled and waved when he saw Billy. As he limped over, I saw that his face had two big stripes slashed into it. 'All right big man?' he said with his hand outstretched.

'Tiger,' said Billy as he took it. 'Long time no see.'

Billy put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me forwards. 'Do you think you could do something with this one?'

Tiger looked at me like he was a bookie eyeing up a greyhound. I expected him to grab me by the jaw and inspect my teeth. But he didn't. He just winked at me. 'Oh aye,' he said. 'With paws like that I'll be able to turn him into a fighter.'

I looked round to the boys standing by the ring. There were more than a dozen of them. They were skinny with big shoulders and flat faces. They pushed into each other when they weren't looking at me. One of them had a tattoo of a puma on his back, the claws made to look as if they were drawing blood.

I turned to Tiger. 'Can I do some boxing?'

He scratched at his stripes. 'You'll do that when you're ready.' He pointed to the corner where there was a few lockers built into the wall. 'Get changed.'

I looked at Billy. He nodded and told me to get on. He'd come back for me later. As I walked over, I wondered if there was anywhere to get some privacy. I put my bag on the bench. I felt a bit self-conscious getting my kit off in front of the others. Especially as it was so cold. I watched Billy leave and Tiger turn and slap his hands together as he called the boys into a circle. I dropped my trousers and put on my shorts and vest. I joined the group next to the ring. A couple were sparring already, but not actually hitting each other. 'Can I do some boxing?' I heard one of the boys whine. I turned round but couldn't see who said it.

Tiger started us on toe touches, squats and star jumps. When we were warm he jogged us round the gym. The other boys started calling me chubby. I never felt fat before, but compared to this lot I was. They were all built like whippets. Even after sprints and jogs they didn't seem to be breathing that hard. I was shagged already. I stumbled and someone pushed me.

'Can I do some boxing?' said a voice behind me.



I turned round, but was unbalanced and knocked over.

‘Prick,’ I said to the boy standing over me.

‘Oooh,’ said someone as the boy crowded me, his face twisted and his shoulders and arms twitching. I gulped and felt my stomach lurch. This guy was eager for a fight.

Tiger pushed him away from me. ‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’ he said. ‘I’ll decide when fists are thrown.’

He reached down and pulled me to my feet. ‘You’ve a lot to learn before you’ll be getting in the ring.’

I looked around. But the others were already half way round the gym so I ran after them. When we’d completed a few more laps Tiger split us into pairs for sit-ups. ‘Strengthens the stomach,’ he said as he hit himself in the guts. I crunched out twenty sit-ups. They made me grunt. When I swapped with my partner I watched the guy who pushed me over. He was assaulting the heavy bag. His head was tilted almost into his chest and his back twitched as he attacked it with combinations.

Tiger got the medicine ball out next. We sat on either side of lines drawn in the floor and threw it to each other. He told us it improves punching power and reaction times. It was supposed to fly across at random, but it would come to me three times in a row then go to someone else when Tiger was watching. After a couple of minutes, my muscles started to cramp. Every time I caught it, the weight seemed to drag into the depth of my stomach. I tried not to show the pain. I kept my body straight and passed it with the same casualness it was thrown at me. Towards the end of the exercise the speed built up and it seemed to get even heavier. I caught it from all angles. The others dummied, and then threw it at me. But, by the time Tiger blew his whistle, I still hadn’t dropped it. He clapped me on the back.

‘Well done wee man,’ he said.

He brought me to a wall that had a huge mirror on it. We stood together looking into it. He rolled his shoulders and shadow boxed. His body moved like he was a dancer or something. I could see him when he was a young guy, standing in a corner with a gum shield in, tapping his chin before he stepped into the middle of the ring. I could even hear the bell and the roar of the crowd.

## Chapter Twelve

Andrew coughed and nodded at the hoardings. 'It's the end of an era.'

'Will you not be glad to see the place cleaned up?'

'It's my history that's disappearing.'

He pointed into the yard. 'When the pit was working,' he said. 'You'd see steam and smoke pumping into the cold night. The big wheel would be turning. Fucking whistles screeching. And men? They'd be like ants. Crawling over everything.'

He waved his hands about. 'It's not like that now though,' he said. 'It was dying by the eighties, but that cunt Thatcher gutted us.'

He pulled his hat tighter on his head.

'And now they're going to sweep away the scraps,' he said.

I wasn't really listening. I'd heard it a hundred times. Maybe not that many. But at least twenty. I knew the stories off by heart.

The men dead from asphyxiation.

The cripples ignored by the government.

The widows and their hungry weans.

When we started on the hill, the wheelchair began to wobble. I had to push at a funny angle to keep it going straight. It made things hard work. I was fair sweating by the time we got halfway to the Institute. I stopped for a rest next to the agent's sign at the lane to the old place.

'They'll be selling it soon,' I said.

'It's not all bad,' he said.

'How do you work that out?'

'Once they've sorted the will out,' he said. 'You'll be able to get a wee flat of your own.'

'We'll see about that.'

'Or you could go and stay with Suzanne.'

'Trying to get rid of me?'

'No.'

I looked at the bony knuckles folded in his lap. 'Well shut up about her.'

'She wants to help you son. She's your-'

I bent as I forced the wheelchair forward. 'What? My mammy? My sister? Jesus. No wonder I'm having trouble sleeping.'

He turned his wrinkly neck. 'She rang again yesterday,' he said.

'So what?'

'She wants to speak to you.'

'Well I don't want to speak to her.'

'This won't fix anything.'

I pushed harder. 'I wish she'd just let me stay in my own house.'

'It's too big for you,' he said. 'It's better off sold.'

I didn't say anything.

'And anyway,' he said. 'You're only fifteen.'

'I'll be sixteen next month.'

'That might be so,' he said. 'But we're all worried about you. You've had some big upsets the past few weeks. You shouldn't be on your own to face that sort of stuff.'

'I don't want to live with them.'

'Why don't you just talk to her?'

'All right then I will,' I said. 'As long as you promise to stop going on about it.'

'She wants to take you out.'

'To where?'

'Someplace fancy,' she said.

'You know what that means.'

'She wants to treat you.'

'Does she fuck,' I said. 'She's got something up her sleeve.'

As we got closer to the church, I noticed a light on inside. Billy came out of the door with a pair of stepladders on his shoulder. He leaned them against his van and then pushed them up onto the roof bars. He was tying them on when he saw us.

'All right men?'

Andrew waved. 'How you doing son?'

Billy frowned as he watched me lean into the wheelchair. 'That needs seeing to.'

I stopped and looked at him. 'It's been like this for a while.'

'Why did you not say something?'

‘I didn’t want to put you to any trouble.’

He went into the van and came over with a toolbox. He got on his haunches and pulled at the wheel. ‘Lift the front up,’ he said to me.

I leaned against the handgrips. ‘That all right?’

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘Put it back down.’

He frowned as he gripped the axle. ‘Pass me that screwdriver.’

I picked one out. ‘This all right?’

His thumb touched mine when I gave him it. There was dirt in the creases of his knuckles.

‘Cheers pal,’ he said.

His forearms rippled as he wedged it into the rim and twisted a spanner on the hub. When he was finished, he twirled the spokes with his finger. ‘That should do it.’

‘Thanks son,’ said Andrew.

‘No problem,’ said Billy. ‘If there’s anything else, you just need to give me a shout.’

He rolled his head at me and held up his fists. ‘How’s the training?’

‘Fiona’s noticed my muscles already.’

‘Fringe benefits,’ he said. He nodded then stepped towards the van. ‘I better get on with this or I’ll never get my dinner.’ He was putting the tools away when he turned to me.

‘I’m going for a run in the morning if you fancy it?’

‘If you want shown up I will.’

‘We’ll soon see about that,’ he said. He winked at Andrew and started to whistle a Rangers tune as he shut the van doors.

I leaned into the chair and got the momentum back up. I steered it this way and that as I pushed. ‘It’s brilliant,’ I said. ‘Like a fucking racing motor.’

‘Go fucking easy,’ he said. ‘You’ll have me in the road. And mind your fucking language.’

‘Sorry.’

When we got to the Institute, Andrew told me to stop at the gate. He turned his head so that he could see me.

‘Make sure you look after that lassie.’

‘I will.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Do you know what I’m saying?’

I shook my head.

He rolled his eyes then lowered his voice to a hissing whisper. 'Wear something,' he said.

I suddenly realised what he was on about. I didn't know what I supposed to say. I just nodded and mumbled at him.

He sighed and took out his wallet. He gave me a fiver.

'You don't need to do that.'

'Get the lassie some chocolate,' he said as he climbed out of the wheelchair.

I opened the living room window to let some air in. I checked the fridge to make sure the beer was cold. Then I skinned a spliff and put it in the sideboard. I threw the leftover bits of tobacco and paper into the fire. As they went up, I gazed into the flames. I was going to start the night with a drink and a smoke in front of the telly. When she was nice and relaxed, I'd move her into my room for some Jamiroquai.

I walked through to make sure all was in order. It looked really tidy because I'd dusted and vacuumed. It smelt nice. A kind of lemony pine scent that the air freshener said was from the fjords of Norway. I folded the duvet back in a triangle like an advert for a cabin. One of the luxury ones that you get in the depths of the forest. Snow on the windowsill and a roaring fire. The type of place where you bring a lassie for a special occasion like getting your hole. I drew my hand down the sheet as if she was already lying there. I started to get a stander. I was that horny I reached under the mattress and pulled out the magazine. I flicked through the pages until I saw Flora's long brown legs astride the arm of a chair. I imagined I was Jimmy meeting her in the cabin. He knocks on the wooden door. She's wearing a bright red dressing gown. You better come in, she says. Candles are fucking everywhere. An open bottle of champagne next to the fireplace. He winks at her and she smiles. The tip of her tongue touches her lip. As she walks towards the bed, she turns to look at him.

I stroked myself as I glanced at the pictures. I saw Flora bringing Jimmy to the luxury sheets. She gazes into his eyes. He leans towards her and pulls her face close to his. She flops against him and her dressing gown just falls open. He puts his hand on her and she moans. He pushes the garment aside and has a good look at her.

Fucking gorgeous, he says.

She unbuttons his trousers and wraps her fingers around his cock.

I stroked myself harder and harder. I was on the verge of shooting my bolt, when there was a knock at the door. I stood up and the magazine fell to the carpet. I kicked it under the bed. I tried to get my breath as I pulled my trousers up. I hoped she wouldn't notice how flustered I was. The door knocked again and the letterbox squeaked as it was opened wide. She shouted into the flat. 'Jamie, are you there?'

I checked my shirt and trousers to make sure everything was straight. I scanned the room before I left it. As I stepped along the hall, I patted my hair. Then I opened the door and smiled at her.

'Hiya.'

## Chapter Thirteen

The Lodge smelled of damp. Tables and chairs were arranged in a horseshoe that faced a stage. Framed pictures decorated the walls, mostly of men in suits. A couple were of soldiers. Billy didn't say who any of them were. Behind the seating was a carpeted area where we changed out of our tracksuits. He took me into the kitchen for a glass of juice.

At the other end of the hall was an office. On the desk was a wooden stand with a scroll carved into it.

'Worshipful Master,' I said. 'Is that you?'

'Aye,' he said as if he was embarrassed. He bent down and turned on a radiator. It clicked as it warmed up. 'Make yourself comfy.'

I sat down and checked out the room. There was a picture of the Queen on the wall. And one of King William of Orange, pointing a sword from the saddle of a prancing horse. A shelf was stacked with books. A bowler hat rested on top of a filing cabinet. He pulled a folder from the top drawer and sat at the desk with it. He gestured to the shelf. 'Get yourself a book if you want.'

I picked one about the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Rifles. 'Is this good?'

He looked over the papers he was reading. 'It's about the original UVF.'

'Who were they?'

'Just before the First World War a lot of the Irish were wanting independence,' he said. 'The Volunteers were raised because the Protestants in Ulster wanted to stay British.'

'Oh aye,' I said as I flicked through the book. The pictures were in black and white. Men parading on town squares with broom handles on their shoulders, or pointing them ahead as if they had bayonets on them.

'So these are not the same ones that are spray painted on the back wall?'

'No,' he said. 'They just use the name.'

'So what happened to the old ones?'

He put the file on the desk and rested back in his chair. He curled his hands behind his head. 'The war started,' he said. 'They signed up, and most of them were killed on the Somme.'

He looked at me and then picked up his pen. As he wrote in the file, the heater clicked again. The room filled with the smell of burnt dust. I turned the page and saw

a man twisted in coils of barbed wire. I read about the Volunteers marching with their sashes on, singing hymns and Orange songs as the bullets cut them down.

‘Sure it is old but it is beautiful  
And its colours they are fine.’

The next page had a photo of a man twisted in the bottom of a trench. Even though one of his eyes was half sunk in the mud, it was open. It couldn’t blink because he was dead. His shirt was torn. You could see his nipple. There wasn’t any hair on his chest. There didn’t seem to be a wound on him. He was still holding his rifle.

Billy parked beside a rusty van. We carried the messages into a garden that had an old washing machine lying in the grass. The door we knocked had a white metal handgrip bolted on the jamb. An old man answered. He smiled when he saw Billy. He ushered us inside. It didn’t smell very nice.

‘All right son?’ he said to me. His voice was croaky.

I followed Billy into the kitchen. It had the same sort of cupboards as Andrew’s, but these were a bit grimy and the shelves were empty. Billy started to put the cans on them. I put the eggs and milk in the fridge. There was nothing else in there but a jar of marmalade.

The old man sat down by the table. He smiled at me.

‘He’s a good fellow is Billy.’

I wasn’t sure about the accent. ‘Are you Irish?’

‘From Belfast,’ he said. He smiled and looked into the distance. ‘I came to Stony Cross during the war. I was a Bevin Boy.’

‘Did you not want to go home afterward?’

‘Aye son, I did that.’ He nodded to a picture of a woman on the windowsill. ‘But sure, I met a lassie.’

Billy wrapped the plastic bags up. He leaned over the old man. ‘Are you eating all right?’

The old man patted his stomach. ‘Aye.’ he said. He looked at me. ‘He’s a good fellow is Billy.’

I nodded. ‘He is.’

‘I’ll not hear any different.’

I didn’t know what to say to that.



Billy rolled up his sleeves. 'Does your home help not wash the dishes?'

'She hasn't the time,' said the old man. He leaned forward and stared at me.

'Come and sit down,' he said. 'I can hardly see you there.'

Billy leaned over the sink and turned the tap on. He held his hand under the flow. He frowned as he turned to me. 'This water's cold.' He went into the hall and came back through. 'The gas has run out.'

The old man frowned and scratched his head. 'I hadn't noticed.'

Billy shook his head. 'Social services,' he said. 'Worse than fucking useless.'

'Mind your language.'

'Sorry,' said Billy. He opened a drawer in the cabinet. 'Where's your gas card?'

'It's in there.'

Billy rattled around until he found it. He held it to me. Then he gave me a tenner. 'Nip down the Post Office and sort this out.'

When I got back, he'd washed the dishes and was drying his hands. 'I boiled the kettle,' he said as he put the towel on the handle of the oven.

'Can I use the phone?' he asked the old man. He went into the living room. I heard him talk to someone from the council. He obviously knew the guy because he got hold of him on a Saturday and asked after his children. Then he told him about the garden and the washing machine and how much of a disgrace it was. He ended the call saying, 'Much appreciated.'

He came back into the kitchen. 'They should be round on Monday.' He got a frying pan out of the cupboard. 'Right,' he said. 'Who's hungry?'

I went to the worktop to help. He told me to put some toast on. 'Did you not fancy going to the football today?'

'I'd like to have,' he said and gestured to the old fellow. 'But.'

'Most people would rather go to the game.'

'I'm sure they would,' he said. 'That's the modern world for you. When I was younger, times were hard all right. But we wouldn't have let an old boy live like this. We'd have cut his grass and took the rubbish out of his garden. We'd have given him a bit of dignity.'

'You sound like Andrew,' I said. 'He's always going on about the community.'

‘We’ve more in common than you’d think,’ he said. He turned to look at me. ‘I don’t understand why people these days are so fucking selfish. It’s not just one or two. It’s the whole country. There must be something wrong in our system that’s causing it. I mean, where the fuck does it come from?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ he said. ‘It’s the welfare state giving people money for nothing. They’re that used to sitting around, their whole life gets to be about leisure. If you were to tell them to help an old man, they’d ask what was in it for them.’

The pan hissed as he dropped an egg into it. ‘Selfish cunts,’ he said.

‘But I don’t see anything wrong with a bit of leisure time.’

‘There isn’t,’ he said.

‘So why not take a day playing pool or something?’

‘It’s about discipline,’ he said. ‘The time for rest is when the chores are done.’

‘Doesn’t sound like much fun to me.’

‘Fun doesn’t put food on the table.’

‘You could always sign on the Bureau.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ he said, his lips tight and his chin out. Then he laughed. ‘You had me going there.’ He turned to the old man. ‘Did you hear that?’ he said. ‘Cheeky wee bugger.’

The old man smiled again. ‘He’s a good fellow is Billy.’

Before long we were each facing a plate of fried eggs on toast. The old man looked to the ceiling and asked God to bless his ‘friends across the sea’ before he sliced into his. He took a while chewing and swallowed as if he was eating bricks. He cleared his throat with a drink of tea, and then turned to Billy. ‘So when are you going back over?’

‘Funny you should ask,’ said Billy. ‘Next weekend. Travelling out first thing on Saturday, staying the night, and back on Sunday.’

‘I wish I was going with you.’

‘You can come if you want.’

‘I’m past that now,’ said the old man. ‘I’ll never go back.’ He turned to look at me. ‘Except in a box.’

‘I’ve never been to Belfast,’ I said. ‘What’s it like?’

‘The people are great,’ he said. ‘Very welcoming.’

‘Would you like to come?’ said Billy. ‘They’ll look after us.’

‘I’ll have to talk to Andrew about it.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘I just want to check that he’s not got anything planned.’

‘Well let me know.’

‘I’ve not even got a passport.’

‘You don’t need one,’ he said.

‘Who’ll pay my fare?’

‘We’re going in the van.’

‘Plenty of room,’ said the old man. ‘And you’ll love it over there. You might even meet a lassie.’

‘He’s got a girlfriend here,’ said Billy.

The old man laughed. ‘Sure, you better not go then.’

Billy smiled and then looked serious. ‘Tommy would appreciate your company.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘We’ve family over there.’

‘Maybe I will then.’

## Chapter Fourteen

Tiger tucked his head into his shoulder and slowly launched a jab followed by a right. The thing I had to remember was that I should turn my body into the cross. 'That's where the power is,' he said as he gestured to his legs and hips. 'It comes from the ground up.'

I copied him and he said it was good, but that I need to keep my head down and be quicker at getting my hands back into defence. I hunched and stared into the mirror, surprised by the aggression in my eyes and how intimidating I looked. I started to jab and cross, moving quicker and quicker until my hands were like pistons. Tiger stood beside me as I worked, pulling my arms back, telling me I always had to keep my guard up so the opponent couldn't hit me in the face. He stepped back and said that I should watch myself closely, checking out the movements I made and what shots were coming as a result. I punched towards the reflection, then my hands came back and I knew I was getting there, working on my attack and my defence at the same time.

'Relax,' he said. He told me I was bunching up my shoulders too much. Smoothness is the way. It keeps the muscles loose, keeps the hands up, the defence good.

After a while, he shouted one of the other boys over. His ribs stretched the skin of his chest. There was loads of wee muscles visible on his shoulders and his arms.

'What's that boss?'

Tiger told him to do some mitt work with me. The guy held up his hands. I faced him. He shimmied his body. I launched a jab and he tapped it with his palm. We worked for a while and occasionally he would reach in and swipe me on the side of the head. All the time he was telling me to keep my head moving, keep my eye on my opponent, always ready to react, always looking for a way round their defence. I was trying my best to get to him, but his body always moved where I didn't expect. His hands were that fast, and he could easily slap me on the ears. He said I should vary my rhythm. Not do the same thing all the time.

He showed me what he meant. He tapped me on the head a few times and my arms got higher and higher to block the blows. Then he swung low and got me on the side. It was just a tap, but if he'd put force into it, he could have really hurt me.

‘Try it,’ he said.

I went for his head and watched his defence rise. I ducked and tried to get him on the side, but he laughed and stepped out of the way and tapped me on the ear.

‘But always keep your eye open for the counter punch,’ he said.

After boxing, I went to meet Suzanne. She was wearing a lilac dress and high heels. I caught a couple of men looking at her as we walked in to the restaurant. The waiter came over as if she was his best customer. He called her Mrs O’Neil. ‘Lovely to see you,’ he said as he led us into a private room at the side. The table was circular and the seats had velvet cushions on them. A huge portrait hung on the wall. It was the tobacco baron who used to own the house. He had a raggy looking bit of fur draped over his shoulder. His face was bright red and his nose was massive.

When we were served our drinks, Suzanne leaned on the table and asked how I was getting on at school. She frowned when I told her about history. Within a couple of minutes she was ranting about the romanticism that accompanies any conversation about the Jacobites.

‘Imagine living in one of their hovels,’ she said.

As she ran on, I thought Jimmy Mac. If he lived in a mud hut in the middle of the Highlands, he’d have ways of making it cosy. He’d have a fire in there for starters, burning wood he’d gather from the moors.

Flora enters the hut as he tends the fire. She has a woollen blanket over her shoulder, and a couple of pots of milk hanging from a yoke. A few flakes of snow follow her inside.

It’s freezing, she says as she puts the pots by the side of the wall.

They eat porridge and bits of black pudding made from blood leaked out of the leg of a cow. When they finish their chores, they get into a bed made from straw and sheepskins. It’s lovely and warm, lying there in the glow of the fire.

Suzanne asked if I was listening. She rolled her eyes and repeated her plans for the house. If I agreed, she’d not sell it through an agent, we could put it up for auction.

‘We’ll get more money that way.’

‘Can we not keep it?’

‘What for?’

‘It’s our home.’

‘It’s the place we were brought up,’ she said. ‘But we all have to grow up and move on.’

‘I’d still like to live there.’

She looked regretful. ‘It’s too big for you.’

‘Andrew could stay with me.’

‘How would he get up and down to the toilet?’

‘We could fit a stair lift.’

‘Jamie,’ she said. ‘I know you’re attached to it, but it has to go.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s cold and drafty,’ she said.

I thought of Jimmy Mac living there, him and Flora making the place homely.

‘It would need lots of work to bring it up to spec,’ she said. ‘And for what?’

You might think it’s where you want to be. But in the next couple of years you’ll grow out of Stony Cross. And where will we be then?’

She frowned as she dabbed at the corner of her mouth. Then she clutched her napkin and held it against the tablecloth. ‘I spoke to my mammy before she died,’ she said. ‘We thought it would be best to sell the house. We can use some of the money to give you a good start when you go to uni.’

‘Sounds like you’ve got my life planned out for me.’

She glared at me for a second and was about to say something when the waiter came in with our plates.

‘How are we doing then?’ he asked.

I thought she was going to order him to mind his own business. But she blinked a couple of times before giving him a smile. ‘Fine, thank you,’ she said in her best Edinburgh. She turned to me as she laid her napkin across her lap. ‘This looks lovely, doesn’t it?’

‘Anything else I can get you?’ he asked.

She raised her hand and he left with a final smirk.

‘Let’s eat now,’ she said. ‘We can talk afterwards.’

I cut into my steak. It was really tender. The sauce was delicious. Compared to what I’d been eating at Andrew’s, this was a banquet. After she’d had a couple of mouthfuls she held her hand to her chest as if she’d just remembered something.

‘Have I told you about the builders?’

‘No.’

‘We meant to let you know last September,’ she said. ‘But with everything that’s been happening.’

She put her knife on her plate and lifted her glass. She smiled at me before having a drink.

‘We’ve extended the house,’ she said. ‘Made the kitchen bigger, with a toilet downstairs for guests.’ She opened her hands like a magician showing a new trick. ‘And now, most importantly, we have a huge back bedroom.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

She had a long breath and tapped her glass with her finger ‘Have you thought any more about coming to stay?’

I mashed chip with my fork. ‘I don’t know.’

‘It’s got an en-suite,’ she said.

‘A what?’

‘A toilet just for the room.’

‘What about Andrew?’ I asked. ‘Who’d look after him?’

‘We’ll be able to sort that out easily enough,’ she said. Then she smiled and nodded.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said.

‘Well the room’s not going away,’ she said. She poured some water into her glass. ‘I know things have been a shock for you.’ She looked into my eyes. ‘But I want to do anything I can for you.’

I opened my mouth to tell her I was happy to stay in Stony Cross. But, before I could actually say anything, she stopped me by holding her hand up.

‘Take some time,’ she said. ‘Think about it.’

As she looked at me, I could feel myself wanting to nod and do what she wanted. But I didn’t. I sideswiped her with the question I’d wanted to ask for ages.

‘Who’s my father?’

She looked at me for a couple of seconds, her fingers twisting her napkin.

‘Well?’ I asked.

‘I’ll tell you when we’ve sold the house,’ she said.

## Chapter Fifteen

Two men, dressed in black uniforms, leaned against a kiosk. They didn't look like the police that walked the streets of Glasgow. They were more like the ones you see in the pictures. They wore body armour, pistols on their belts, and rifles hung across their chests. Their faces were red, like they were angry enough to hurt anybody who wanted to fuck about with the laws of Ulster. Not that Jimmy Mac was worried about them. He rolled his shoulders and felt the ache from the training. His muscles were tight and itching for a battle. Jimmy knew he could face down these fat-bellied cunts. If he was to get into it with either of them, he knew he wouldn't be the first man down. He felt his chest fill with air as he built himself up for it, his mind already working through his combinations. A few light punches to the side of the constable's head, and then, when his arms were lifted to protect himself, Jimmy would launch one right into his body. A cruncher that would echo right into his liver and probably drop the cunt for an eight count.

Tommy turned to me, his face wrinkled with a frown. 'What's up with you?'

I noticed my breathing was ragged from the fantasy. 'Nothing,' I said.

'Leave him alone,' said Billy. 'The boy's excited. He's never been to the province before.' He edged the van up to the barrier and rolled down his window. One of the police glanced inside, his finger tapping his holster. 'What's the purpose of your visit?'

'We've got some football strips for the Shankill Boy's Brigade.'

'Let me see.'

Billy climbed out and went round the back. I turned so I could watch him open the door. The constable tore through the flap of a box.

'And you paid for these yourself?'

'Not personally,' said Billy. 'The Lodge had a fundraiser.'

'You're a good man so you are.'

They shook hands before Billy jumped back into his seat. The side of the van clanged as the constable slapped it. 'Safe journey now.'

We crossed a yard and went through a gate in a steel fence. The sky was dark grey, and the rain lashed us as we headed into Belfast. Tommy reached for the radio. The Red Hot Chilli Peppers came on. He turned it up. Billy said it was too loud.

'Come on,' said Tommy. 'We're on a road trip.'



Billy turned the music back down and said Tommy should behave or he'd switch it off. Tommy rolled his eyes at me, but he didn't say anything. He sighed then pushed his head forward as he leaned on the dashboard. The road cut through a huge industrial estate, with nothing to look at but fences and hedges and concrete walls. Through gaps in the buildings, Billy nodded towards the famous yellow cranes they used to build the Titanic. We left the docklands and climbed a slip road onto a motorway that cut right into the centre of the city. I was surprised by the stubbornness of the buildings. There weren't any tenements like the ones we had, just rows and rows of stumpy wee terraces. When we reached the Shankill, Billy pointed out the community centre where he'd be doing his business in the morning.

'Very good,' said Tommy. Billy didn't seem to notice the sarcasm. He kept driving, pointing at shops and pubs, telling me where a man could get a good pie, or a nice pint. Eventually, we turned a corner into a narrow street. We pulled into the kerb. As we climbed out, the door to one of the houses opened. This woman stood on the step and folded her arms across her chest. She was skinny and had curly hair. When we got close to her she smiled. There was a line of rot in the space between her front teeth.

Billy called her Hannah when he kissed her on the cheek. She turned and led us into the house. On a table in the living room there was a plate with a pile of sandwiches on it. There was also a sliced up cake and a packet of chocolate biscuits. In the centre was a bottle of Irn Bru and one of lemonade.

'What's the big occasion?' asked Billy.

She looked as if she was pleased and sorry at the same time. 'The twins are back from London for the weekend,' she said.

'Brilliant,' said Tommy.

'Where are we all going to sleep?' asked Billy.

'There's plenty of room,' said Hannah. 'The boys will be fine bunking in together.' She grabbed his forearm. 'But don't you worry. As always, you have your own room.' She looked at me then pointed at the snacks on the table as she led him from the room. 'Dig in then.'

He said they would be in the kitchen. They needed to have a chat about something. I was starving so I didn't say anything. Neither did Tommy. We sat on the couch with a plate each.

'Is she your auntie?' I asked.

His cheeks bulged as he chewed. 'No,' he said. 'Her husband was my da's cousin.'

'Where's he then?'

'Dead,' he said. 'The IRA shot him.'

He lifted the remote and turned the telly on. A newsreader talked about some young guy who got his legs broke for choreing cars. He was in hospital, critical but stable. The woman's accent made her sound like a terrorist. Every one of these fuckers sounded like a terrorist. I wondered if I'd hear a gunshot or a bomb going off at some point over the weekend. The news finished and a programme about gardening came on. A man started on about how fertile the Armagh soil was. He was ancient, but even he sounded like a terrorist.

A couple of minutes later, the front door crashed and somebody shouted from the lobby.

'Mammy?'

Hannah answered in squeals from the kitchen. The twins' voices rumbled as they spoke to her. After a couple of minutes they piled into the living room. One of them had a Liverpool shirt on. 'It's young Thomas,' he said. 'What about you son?' He frowned when he looked at me. Then he smiled and held out his hand. 'I'm George,' he said. As we shook, I saw he had YCV tattooed into three of his knuckles.

The other twin was wearing a tracksuit. A gold necklace rested on his chest. He sat on the arm of my chair. 'How you doing?' he said. 'I'm Eddie.' He grabbed a sandwich and stuffed it into his mouth. 'Starving.'

'So the fuck am I,' said George.

They were silent as they ate. Eddie leaned his foot on the edge of the coffee table, flicking it from side to side like he was tapping out the rhythm of his jaws. Then he dropped his unfinished crust onto a bowl filled with crisps.

'That was just what the doctor ordered.'

He picked up a biscuit and unwrapped it as he stood up. He brushed breadcrumbs from his top onto the floor. 'Get yourselves together,' he said. 'We'll go for a wee tour.' He went into the kitchen to tell his mammy we were going out.

'But you've only just got here,' she said, following him back into the hall.

'Sure,' he said. 'You know us.'

'Can't sit still for a minute,' said George.

Billy came behind her. He was cradling a mug against his belly. His shirt was unbuttoned as if he was relaxing at home. 'Look after these boys,' he said.

Eddie turned as he was reaching for the latch. 'Course we will,' he said.

George held up a can. 'Royal blue emulsion,' he said. 'You only get that round here, so you do.' He got a screwdriver out of the boot and used it to wedge open the lid. 'Shall I stir it?'

'To give an even coat?' asked Eddie. 'Catch yourself on.' He unrolled a plastic bag and held it open. George poured the paint into it. When it was full, Eddie tied a knot at the top and handed it to me.

'What's this for?'

'Your first job for the Protestants of Ulster,' said George.

We got back in the car. I sat in the front. I felt like I was going to a game and I had the football between my legs. George drove until the Union Jacks disappeared. We passed a house with boarded up windows. The suspension rattled as the motor jolted over a pothole. I spotted an Irish flag hanging from a TV aerial. Then they were everywhere, hung from rooftops and lampposts. One was tattered and burnt round the edges. It looked like it had travelled with soldiers through many a battle.

The people walking the pavements didn't seem any different from the Protestants. We passed a gang of boys wearing tracksuits. A woman had a puff on a fag as she pushed her pram. Two lassies had pink jumpers on. An old guy's head was covered with a hat. He was driving one of them electric scooters. He could have been my uncle Andrew going to the Institute. When we passed a paper shop and a bookies, George indicated and turned into a courtyard. There was an overgrown bit of wasteland in the middle of it. I could see five gable ends. Every one had a scene from the troubles on it. The best one was 'Bobby Sands, MP'. He had hair tumbling down the side of his face and a big mouthful of perfect teeth.

'What one?' I asked.

'Take a fucking guess,' said George.

He drove up to the mural. I got out with the bag in my hand. I already had blue paint sticking my fingers together. It was getting under my nails. I could feel my legs trembling as I stood upright. I couldn't stop thinking about it all going wrong and this shower of Catholics chasing me through the alleyways, cornering me and kicking the pure fucking shite out of me.

Eddie rolled his window down. 'Are you going to throw that thing or what?'

Jimmy Mac fills his chest with air and surveys the area. He nods at the three possible escape routes. Then he swings his shoulder and launches the missile. It curves into the air, hitting Bobby on the forehead with a big splat of blue.

'Good fucking shot,' said George.

As the paint rolls over the eyes and down the face, Jimmy notices two lads appear at the corner. One nudges the other and then turns and whistles. Within seconds a pal joins them. And then another comes out of a house. He calls and one of them points at the car. Jimmy leans against the roof and stares at them. Somebody shouts.

'Get in.'

The voice brought me back to reality. I ducked inside and expected George to drive. But he didn't. He pressed the stereo button and the sounds of a flute band filled the square. He rested back in his seat like he was the king of Ireland, or the top UVF man in Belfast. He pointed to the youths as if he had a gun in his hand. He waited until they were within stone throwing distance, then he revved the engine and let the clutch out. The car lurched forward and spun on the square before we left in the same direction we came in. The Protestant music attracted attention from people on the pavements. Their mouths went square as they gave us the fingers and shouted Orange Bastards. I started to giggle as we headed back towards the Shankill.

The smile left me as we got to a parade of shops. An army truck pulled out of an alleyway and blocked the pavement, soldiers piling from the back and tucking themselves into doorways. They trained their rifles up and down the street. People were being searched as they walked past. Two of the men crossed onto the road. One had the wire of an aerial dangling above his head. The other was a policeman. He held his weapon in his outstretched hands, as if he was ready to fire. He stepped into our path, and signalled us to the kerb.

I saw a future of years on the H-Block learning the history of the Protestant struggle. Making drums and being taught how to play them. Eating food a dog would turn its nose at, and having to sleep wrapped in itchy blankets.

'Jesus,' I said. 'We're in for it now.'

'Calm your jets,' said George as he patted me on the shoulder.

'We've been through this a hundred times,' said Eddie.

'It's nothing,' said George.

I lifted my hand. 'What about the fucking state of me?' I asked.

'Easy now,' said George as he rolled the window down and leaned his elbow on it.

'What about you?' he said to the constable. It was like he was talking to a pal down the pub.

'Spot check,' said the constable. 'Let me see your licence.'

When George passed it over, the man examined it before bending down to have a good look inside the car. I could smell his aftershave.

'You're a long way from home,' said the constable.

'We only live up the road,' said George.

'You know what I'm talking about. What are you doing down here?'

'We're just showing our cousins the city.'

'They're Jocks, so they are,' said Eddie.

The constable lifted his flattened nose and pointed at my hand. 'What's with the paint?'

'We've been doing a job for our auntie,' said Eddie.

'Sure, she can't do it herself,' said George.

'She's a widow woman,' said Eddie.

'Her husband died in the Falklands,' said George.

'And her pensions shite,' said Eddie.

'So there's no money for decorators,' said George.

The constable nodded as they spoke. His eyes narrowed as he looked at George. 'Do I know you?'

'Don't think so.'

'Ever been in trouble?'

'Are you kidding?' said George. 'Our mammy would kill us.'

The constable nodded again and held the licence up. George tried to take it but the guy held on to it for a couple of seconds. 'I don't want to see you boys down here again.'

As he drove the car away, George looked at me. 'The old double act,' he said.

'Works a treat,' said Eddie.

'Thought we were done there,' I said to him.

'We would have been if you'd kept up with the panicking.'

'Jocks,' said George.

‘All talk,’ said Eddie. ‘So you are.’

‘But when it comes to the fucking pinch.’

‘You shit your pants.’

I felt my shoulders slump. I reach for the lock of the glove box and fiddled with it. Then George flicked me on the arm. ‘Sure, we’re only kidding with you.’

Eddie leaned forward and gripped my shoulders. ‘That was some shot boy.’

‘And the looks on them Taigs’ faces,’ said George. ‘Fucking priceless.’

‘And we let the fuckers know who done it,’ said Eddie.

‘YCV,’ said George.

‘What are they?’

‘The youth wing of the UVF,’ said Tommy.

‘Terrorists,’ said George, as if he was a TV screen filled with the angry face of Ian Paisley.

Eddie grabbed me again and shouted into my ear. ‘Terrorists.’ He looked at his brother and both of them shouted it. George slapped the steering wheel as if he was a drummer. Eddie shook my seat backwards and forwards and screamed like he was charging into a battle. George gave the horn a few blasts. He shook his head before turning to me.

‘Terrorists,’ he said as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

A fat woman opened the door. She had a tattoo of a rose on her hand. Gold rings bit into her fingers. She had nice eyes. ‘Long time no see,’ she said as she walked back inside. We followed her into the living room. The place smelled like incense sticks had been lit to hide the whiff of dirt sheets. Lego bricks were scattered next to a teddy bear on the floor. The corner of a blanket was caught in the leg of a chair. A black and white film was on the telly.

‘Cary Grant,’ she said. ‘Don’t you just love him?’

‘If I was a faggot I might,’ said Eddie.

‘Sit down and shut up,’ she said and disappeared into the kitchen. Eddie snatched the armchair. The rest of us piled onto the couch. George put the bag of cans by the side. He picked up a sock and threw it at Tommy.

‘There’s your dinner.’

Tommy dropped it on the floor and looked around the room. ‘This place is pure humming.’

‘You better shut up,’ said Eddie as he pointed at his brother. ‘That’s his wife you’re talking about.’

‘More like yours,’ said George.

Eddie pushed himself into the back of the chair and opened his legs. ‘I have fucked her,’ he said as he grabbed at his crotch. He then leaned over and nodded at his brother. ‘But that dirty bastard licked her out.’

‘Did I fuck,’ said George.

‘Your breath still stinks of it,’ said Tommy.

George leaned over my legs and pointed at him. ‘How would you know what cunt smells like?’

‘I’ve shagged more lassies than you.’

‘Virgin,’ said Eddie.

‘No since I last saw your mammy.’

Eddie and George looked at each other. Then Eddie pushed himself forward as if he was getting ready to fight. ‘What was that?’

Tommy frowned. ‘I was only messing about.’

‘Were you now?’

Tommy looked from one to the other. Then he laughed. ‘Shut up,’ he said.

Eddie pointed his finger at him. ‘Had you going there.’

‘Fucking shit himself,’ said George. ‘Did you hear him fart?’

Eddie wafted his hand in front of his face. ‘I can whiff it from here.’ He looked round the room. ‘Sure, I hate the smell of spunk.’

‘Or is that Martha’s knickers?’ asked George.

‘You’d know,’ said Tommy.

‘Any more out of you,’ said Eddie. ‘And I’ll go to her fucking laundry basket and make you eat a pair.’

Martha walked back into the room. ‘A pair of what?’

Eddie pointed at me and Tommy. ‘These fucking idiots.’

Martha pursed her lips then looked at me. ‘Ignore him,’ she said. ‘He’s a prick.’

She sat by the table. I watched her thighs squish together as she crossed her legs. She opened a velvet box and pulled out a set of scales.

‘Talking of pricks,’ said Eddie. ‘How’s that husband of yours?’

‘He’s looking after the wee ones back at his place.’



Eddie leaned forward. 'For the night?'

She tilted her head as she spoke. 'Don't get any ideas,' she said. 'How much do you want?'

'An eighth,' said George.

'When did he get out?' asked Eddie.

'Last week,' she said. 'He's keeping a low profile.'

She dropped a penny onto one of the pans. 'He says he wants to try and get a life,' she said.

'And what's wrong with the one God gave him?' asked George.

She trimmed a bit of hash of her block and weighed it. 'That bit's just over,' she said.

'Better than the last time,' said Eddie.

'Cheeky cunt,' she said as she wrapped it in cling-film. 'He's staying out of it. He thinks we all have to grow up sometime.'

'Feared more like,' said George.

'You wouldn't say that to his face.'

'Want a fucking bet?' said George. 'Phone him now.'

'Aye all right,' she said as she packed the scales away. 'Fifteen pound for the gear,' she said.

'I'll owe you it,' said Eddie.

She put her hand out. 'Like fuck you will,' she said. 'My electric's due.'

'You know I'm good for it.'

'You're good for nothing.'

He pulled out a tenner. 'Come on,' he said. 'I'll let you have the rest before I go back to London.'

She snatched the note. 'You better.'

'Do you want a beer now?' said George.

She put her hand on her hip and pushed her belly forward. 'Trying to get me drunk are you?'

George threw her a can. He gave me and Tommy one too. Then he let me have a swig of his vodka. I felt it burn my guts as it went down. After a couple more swallows and a few smokes at a spliff, I ended up feeling quite relaxed. I settled into the corner of the couch and watched the living room and its reflection in the window.



The door was tapped every few minutes and someone would come in to buy a bit of hash.

When things started to quieten down, Martha got up and shut the curtains.

George nudged me. 'What do you think of her then?'

I looked at the way her stomach curved over the top of her skirt. 'She's nice.'

'She's a fucking dog,' said Eddie.

'What's that?'

Eddie nodded at the window. 'I said is there a fog?'

She turned to the room. 'Not out there.' She walked over to the couch and tapped Eddie on the head. 'But there is in here,' she said.

Eddie pulled her onto his knee. 'You're a big honey.'

She struggled to get up and he tickled her waist.

'Fuck off,' she said. She laughed and struggled some more. 'Fuck off,' she shouted.

He let her go and she stood up. She pulled her top over her belly as she walked over to the stereo. She put a tape on and shimmied her hips with the music. See for a big lassie, she could really move. She kept dancing as she rolled another spliff, her tongue licking the papers before she winked at me.

'Do you like the music?'

'Who is it?'

'Brand New Heavies.'

'It's cool,' I said. 'Flows like a river of sound.'

She nodded to Eddie. 'Do you hear that?'

'What?'

'The boy here,' she said. She turned to me. 'I love your accent,' she said. 'Let me hear you say something.'

'Like what?'

'Anything.'

'I think you've got some competition,' said George to Eddie.

'Shut up you,' said Martha. She looked at me again. 'Go on then.'

'Do you want me to recite a poem?'

She sat forward and rubbed her hands together. 'Aye,' she said. 'That would be great.'

'It's called 'A Man's a Man For A' That,' I said.

Eddie folded his arms and leaned against the wall. 'Listen at the wee prick,' he said.

'What did I tell you?' said Martha. She nodded to me.

I cleared my throat. I was aware of the hard stares from Eddie and George. I was a bit stuttery at the start, but with Martha's smiles and nods my voice got better. I only recited one verse. By the time I got to the last line my body was full of confidence, so I looked into her eyes as the words left my mouth. She clapped her hands. 'Sure, that was dead on.' She turned to Eddie. 'That's how you do it,' she said.

Eddie nodded at me. 'I don't need to lower myself like that to get my hands on a bit of skirt,' he said.

Martha opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. It was loud like it was the police. She went to the table and started to put her scales and dope away. 'Get that, could you?' she said.

By the time she came back from the kitchen George had brought two guys into the room. One of them had a black leather jacket on. He looked like he spent a lot of time in the gym. If my mammy was still alive, she'd have called him a fucking Neanderthal or something.

'What about you?' he said to Martha.

She frowned then glanced at the carpet. 'It's not been a great week Sugar.'

'Have you got it or what?'

'Nearly,' she said.

'Bunty,' said Sugar.

The other guy took his hands out his pockets and stepped forward. 'Aye boss.'

'Sort this out,' said Sugar.

Bunty pointed at the kitchen door. 'In there,' he said. When they were gone, Sugar frowned at us.

Eddie got up. 'Do you want to sit here?'

'What are you boys up to?'

'Just having a smoke,' said George.

Sugar hung his hands over the armrests of the chair. His eyes were sunk under his forehead.

'Is that all?'

'Aye.'

'Not bothering this lassie are you?'

George licked his lips and swallowed. 'No.'

'You don't sound so fucking sure.'

'Honest,' said Eddie.

'Talking to you was I?'

'No.'

'Well keep it fucking zipped.'

Sugar blew air between his lips. He lifted his hands and tapped the tips of his fingers together. Then he turned his eyes on me. He frowned as if he'd just noticed I was there.

'Where are you from?'

'Scotland.'

'One of them ones are you? Over here to help the cause?'

'He's a good boy, so he is,' said Eddie.

'What the fuck did I tell you?'

George pulled a can out of the bag and opened it. Sugar glared at him.

'What have I done now?'

'You fucking know.'

'Do you want a beer?'

Sugar looked from one to the other of the twins. 'Shall I tell you what I want?'

'What?' said George as he put the can down.

Before Sugar could tell him, Bunty and Martha came back. Bunty said something about her dues and closing her down if she didn't buck her ideas up. Then he sat on the couch and leaned over my legs to speak to George. His neck had a wee red hand of Ulster tattooed on it.

'What have the twins been up to?'

'Nothing much,' said George.

'Just working,' said Eddie.

'And taking the odd trip down the Falls,' said Sugar.

'We've just been showing the lads about.'

'The Protestant warriors?'

Bunty touched my hand. 'Sure, he is and all.' He held the fingers up for Sugar to see the paint stain. 'Check this out.'

Sugar's eyes cut right into me. 'You're ten years too late mucker,' he said.

'Have you not read the papers? It's all over now.'

‘That’s the Jocks for you,’ said Bunty.

‘They turn up to a party,’ said Sugar. ‘When everyone else has went home.’

He got up and moved for the door. Then he turned to the twins. ‘Get your coats.’

‘Ah come on,’ said Eddie. ‘We’re on holiday.’

‘What the fuck did I tell you?’

I climbed out of the couch to go with them. Sugar put his hand on my shoulder. ‘What age are you?’

‘Eighteen.’

He laughed and nudged Bunty. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘And I’m sixty-five,’ said Bunty.

Sugar shook his head at me. ‘You stay here as back up,’ he said. ‘If we need any muscle we’ll give you a shout.’

Bunty laughed as he stepped out of the house. ‘That was a good one,’ he said.

Sugar turned before he went through the door. His forehead seemed to get even bigger as he focused on Tommy. ‘Can you drive?’

‘Aye.’

Sugar nodded. ‘Come on then.’

Tommy frowned, but collected his jacket.

Eddie was last out. ‘Can you find your way back to my mammy’s?’ He held his hand out. ‘It’s just round the corner.’

‘He’ll be all right here,’ said Martha.

‘He better be,’ said Eddie.

When the door closed on them, the house was silent. Martha flopped onto the couch. She flashed her eyes at me and gave me a cheeky smile.

‘Do you want to skin one up?’

I could feel her breath on my cheek as she spoke.

The next morning was misty. I sighed into the cold air and glanced round the streets. I passed a brass plaque honouring the dead of the Somme. I kept marching like I was Jimmy Mac on his way home from a serious campaign, medals jangling on his chest. As I walked along the pavement, I looked at the houses. I didn’t know the number, just that the window had a net curtain and the frames were painted brown. Billy’s van was parked outside.

Hannah answered the door. Her head was tight with curlers, and her face screwed up as she blinked at me. 'And where have you been?'

I couldn't look her in the eye. 'Stayed at Martha's.'

'Dirty wee bugger, so you are.'

'I just slept on the couch.'

'Sure you did.' She smiled as she said it, but I ignored her.

'Where's Billy?'

'He's out seeing the Pastor,' she said. 'Go on into the living room.'

Tommy and Eddie were watching the telly. Eddie was wearing nothing but his boxer shorts. He had the remote on his knee flicking from channel to channel. He had a black eye.

'What about you?' he said.

A scream came from the kitchen. I frowned at him. He cupped his hand to his mouth so that his voice would carry.

'Our kid's being a faggot,' he said.

'Shut it you,' shouted George from the kitchen.

'Listen to her,' said Eddie. 'Anybody would think she was hurt.'

Hannah appeared. Her fingernails were edged in blood. 'What did I tell you?' She went back into the kitchen. There were more screams. I went in for a look. George was sitting on a stool with his head bent over the sink. His scalp had a deep gash in it and Hannah was poking at it with a pair of tweezers.

'I've got to get the bits out,' she said. 'Otherwise it'll go septic.'

'Mammy.'

'Shh,' she said. She started to hum rock-a-bye baby as she teased at the cut. Blood dripped onto the stainless steel of the basin.

I went back into the living room. Eddie gave me a smile. 'Belfast eh?' he said. 'It's one thing after another.'

'What have you been up to?'

Eddie put the remote down. 'Never mind us.' He held up his fist. 'How did you get on with big Martha?' He picked at a bullet scar on his thigh. 'Did you ride her or what?'

'Did I fuck.'

Eddie reached across and brushed his hand over his head. 'Lying bastard,' he said with a laugh. 'Good man you are.'

I felt my neck go red and the blush rise to my cheeks.

‘Beamer,’ said Eddie. ‘I fucking knew it.’ He shouted to his brother. ‘The wee boy rode big Martha.’

‘Top man,’ said George. Then he screamed. ‘Mammy.’

‘Don’t be dirty,’ called Hannah. ‘Leave him alone.’

‘While you were having fun,’ said Eddie. ‘Me and George were working like fucking darkies.’

‘Doing what?’

Eddie scratched at one of his eyebrows. ‘Just a bit of business,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Eddie. ‘If you give us some details about your night with Martha.’

‘Nothing happened,’ I said.

‘Fuck you then,’ said Eddie.

I looked at Tommy. He shrugged and told me he’d been told to wait in the motor.

‘And anyway,’ said Eddie. ‘He wouldn’t tell you even if he did.’

‘He’s my pal,’ I said. ‘He tells me everything.’

Eddie’s smile stretched up one side of his face. ‘Not any more,’ he said. ‘The boy’s one of us now.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘He’s coming to London.’

‘When?’

Tommy looked as if he could hardly contain a laugh. ‘As soon as I tell my mammy.’

‘We’re driving Sugar’s motor back for him,’ said Eddie. ‘We land at Stranraer on Wednesday. We’ll come and get him then.’

‘So you’re going to be a duster salesman?’ I said.

‘Don’t be so fucking cheeky,’ said Eddie. ‘Sales Executive is the job title.’

On our way to the community centre, we passed a scheme of houses. Murals covered the gable ends. One was a silhouette of volunteers protecting their neighbourhood from Republican terrorists, the crossed flags of Ulster and Scotland arching over them and the words ‘No Surrender’ scrolled along the base. Three paintings were dedicated

to UVF men killed on active service. Their teeth were as perfect as those of Bobby Sands, their eyes as wide as that soldier in the book. A few youngsters played football on the tarmac underneath them. The fallen volunteers watched like they were fathers crowding the touchline, ready to shout encouragement, or cheer if the ball was kicked into the goal.

As we crossed the road next to a burned-out bus shelter, the pastor told Billy the people of Ulster were sick of the violence. They just want to live in peace like the rest of the country. The twins started laughing until Billy turned to look at them. He told them to stand with the ones waiting at the centre. He smiled as he went up to a couple of men with sashes on. He shook their hands then opened his bag and got his regalia out. Tommy helped lift it over his head. Billy spent a bit of time adjusting it for the photographer. Then the Boy's Brigade football team were led out in their brand-new uniforms. They were skinny and shuddered as they stood in the cold. The coach had a cardigan on and a whistle round his neck. He arranged the taller ones in a row at the back, with the others hunkered down in front. A couple of trophies were placed on the ground and the team captain held a football between his knees. The coach stood at one side and the pastor and Billy stood at the other. The photographer set his camera on a tripod. He moved the row of boys to the left and told Billy to show more of his chest. 'The readers will want to see your sash,' he said as he bent to the viewfinder. The camera whirled while Billy held the coach's elbow and turned to give his speech to the crowd. As his voice echoed against the arch of the community centre, the faces of the dead UVF men were reflected in the glass behind him.

## Chapter Sixteen

Kurt Cobain had a fag in his hand. Smoke curled up past his face. It was as if he was staring at us from behind a net curtain or something. I turned from the poster and smiled at Fiona. 'Shall we have a wee blast?'

She nodded, so I put one together and opened the window. We took turns puffing out into the cold air.

'Tell me about Belfast,' she said.

We sat on the edge of the bed. I described the journey down the Falls Road, all the flags and the artwork of the murals. But I didn't mention the paint bombing, that would have just worried her. I did tell her about going to Martha's.

'Martha?'

'She was this lassie that sold hash,' I said.

She frowned at me. 'Was she pretty?'

'No.'

She continued to stare at me like she was concentrating. I kept looking away from her. 'She wasn't,' I said.

She squeezed my wrist so hard I could feel her nails digging into my skin.

'You sure?'

I forced myself to look into her eyes. 'Honest.'

She let me go. I kneeled on the carpet and reached for my bottom drawer. The bag I pulled out had Hector's House written on it. 'Belfast's best independent record shop.' I held it out to her like I was giving the fucking thing to the queen.

'I brought you back a wee present.'

She took out the tape. She turned it over in her hand and smiled. I could see by her eyes that I'd scored a hit. She held it up and read the words on the side. 'Brand New Heavies,' she said. Then she took it out and handed it to me.

'Stick it on.'

When the smoothness of the music was wafting through the bedroom, I leaned against her and we fell back onto my bed. I kissed her softly, enjoying the touch of our lips. Her hands moved under my shirt and onto my skin. She lifted my tee shirt and I shrugged it over my shoulders. She helped to tug it over my head. I touched the waist of her jeans, unbuttoned them and pulled down the zip. She got off the bed and took them off. Then she lifted her jumper off. She still had her bra and pants on when



she climbed under the covers. She cuddled up to me. 'I missed you while you were away.'

She kissed me and held me tightly. 'Lock the door,' she said.

There wasn't a latch on it, so I wedged the back of the chair under the handle. When I turned round, she lifted up her hips and tugged off her pants. She looked at me as she dropped them from her dangling fingers. 'Are you getting in then?'

I swung my body to the music as moved towards her. She laughed at me and said the tape was brilliant, she hadn't heard them before. She leaned over the side of the bed and picked up the box. As she studied it she said. 'When did you get into these?'

'I heard them in Belfast,' I said. 'Round at Martha's house.'

'Oh,' she said and dropped the box. The cover sheet came out as it bounced on the floor. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

'It doesn't matter where it came from,' I said. 'Just that you like it.'

'It matters to me,' she said.

I lay down next to her. 'She put it on while we were there,' I said. 'As soon as I heard it I knew I'd get it for you.'

She kept staring at the ceiling. Her eyes were filmed with tears.

'Come on sweetheart,' I said.

'Put something else on,' she said.

I clicked through the others until I came to the Stone Roses. I sat by the stereo as the music started. 'This any better?' I stood up and pulled my jeans back up. Then I sat on the side of the bed. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I just heard the tape and thought you might like it. If you don't want it, I'll get you something else.'

She turned to face me. 'No,' she said. 'It was really nice of you to get it for me. I'm just being touchy because I was that worried about you over there.'

I reached across and stroked her hair behind her ears. 'You're the only lassie for me.'

I got back under the covers. The heat of her body made me instantly horny. It wasn't long before she told me to get my jeans off. Then she climbed on top of me and shagged me. She giggled into my ear as she got off and lay beside me. Her legs were interlocked with mine, like we were one person with four feet. We snoozed until the tape ended. Then she asked me to put the Brand New Heavies back on.

'You sure?'

She nodded so I shrugged and done as I was told. She rolled to face the wall, and I tucked myself against her back. She pressed my hand to her tit. I moved her hair out of the way of my mouth, and settled down for another snooze. After a while she said that Martha had good taste because the music was really good. I was half asleep. I licked my dry lips and said, 'Aye, I suppose she has.'

She wiggled her back against me. 'That must be why she's so popular.'

'It isn't that,' I said. 'It's because of the ganja she's selling.'

'Were there a lot of people there?'

'Her living room was like Central Station.'

She rolled over to face me. 'Who else was there?'

'Mainly me and Tommy and the twins.'

'Was it a good night?'

I told her about the laugh we had. But I didn't say anything about how Martha went on about my accent. I certainly didn't mention the poem.

'The twins sound awful cruel,' she said.

'They are.'

I described how they were in the morning. George covered in blood with his mammy cleaning it out of a gash in his head. And Eddie with the bullet scar in his leg.

'You weren't with them when that happened were you?'

I shook my head. 'No.'

'That's a relief,' she said. 'I'd hate to think of you getting too involved with men like that.'

'They're too dangerous for me.'

'When did they go?'

'This guy Sugar turned up and they all went.'

'What did you and Tommy do?'

I spoke before I thought about it. 'He went with them.'

She pulled away from me. 'So it was just you and her?'

I swallowed as I tried to think of a way out. 'Aye,' I said.

She got up on one elbow. 'On your own, listening to romantic music?'

'Not for long,' I said. 'She told me she had to go to her bed.'

Her eyes pierced into me. She gripped the edge of the duvet. 'And did you go with her?'

'Did I fuck,' I said. 'I slept on the couch.'

‘You slept on the what?’ she asked as she pushed me off the bed.

I banged my head when I hit the floor. She got up and held the corner of the duvet to her chest as she stood over me. ‘You stayed the night?’

I rubbed the back of my head. I couldn’t think. ‘Aye,’ I said. ‘But I never touched her.’

She threw the duvet at me. ‘Pull the other one,’ she said. She sat on the bed to get her knickers and jeans on.

‘Fiona.’

She pulled her jumper over her head. ‘Don’t Fiona me.’ She stood up and the tape box crunched under her foot. ‘Ouch,’ she said as she kicked it under the bed. She didn’t look at me while she put on her shoes. She lifted her coat and tucked her bra into one of the pockets.

I got to my feet and placed myself between her and the door. ‘But, I didn’t do anything.’

She lifted her hands up. ‘Get away from me.’

‘You need to listen,’ I said as I tried to grab her.

She scratched the back of my hand. ‘No I don’t.’

‘But you’re my girlfriend.’

She tugged her coat round her shoulders. She pushed the chair out of her way and went into the hall.

I ran after her. ‘You’ve forgotten the tape.’

‘Fuck off,’ she said before the front door slammed behind her.

## Chapter Seventeen

Tiger reached into the equipment box and passed me a couple of small dumbbells. They were like the ones people use to work their arms when they're jogging. He took me down to the mirror and told me to get shadow boxing. When I started punching, he stood next to me saying 'keep your hands up' and 'faster son, faster.' My blood was soon flowing and before I knew it my mind had worked its way round to Fiona. I imagined her getting with another boy. Somebody like Plunk, a wee hard man with a big chin. My heart pumped and my anger built. I changed from wee Jamie MacGregor into the tough guy, Jimmy Mac. He was down the Institute, watching Fiona having a boogie with Plunk, the wee prick's hands on her and her laughing at every word he said.

Jimmy cannot help himself. He cannot just watch. He works his way through the other dancers and accidentally barges into Plunk, digging the wee cunt in the side with his elbow. Plunk turns and dishes out one of his insults.

What did you say? asks Jimmy.

Mind where you're going you fucking diddy, says Plunk.

Jimmy launches straight into him, but not with a punch. He slaps the prick like he would a lassie, a couple of sharp backhanders to the jaw. Plunk puts his hands up to protect himself, but he isn't quick enough.

Tiger interrupted me. He pushed me away from the mirror and told me to join the other lads for a few circuits. As we raced round the gym, stopping and starting, doing squats and sit-ups, Fiona left my mind and I managed to concentrate on the training. I wasn't breathing as heavily as before because I was running most mornings. I was catching up with the others. I was losing weight. My ribs were starting to show. But at the same time my chest was widening and my stomach hardening.

After the circuits, Tiger grabbed me and led me over to the corner. 'We've done a fair bit of speed work with you,' he said. 'What we need to do now is build on your power. So, say hello to the heavy bag.' He grabbed it and pulled it against his stomach. 'You need to hit it like you want to send your fist through it. Do you know what I'm saying?' He screwed his face into a snarl. 'Imagine the fucker's your worst enemy and give it the hardest punches you can manage.'

He stood back and twisted his body as he throws a left at it. The bag lurched back. As it returned he crouched and slugged it with a crushing right. The force of his blows seemed to bend into it. I could imagine what they'd do to a set of ribs. He looked at me. 'Power comes from practising these big hits.'

He stepped aside and gestured for me to take up the position. 'Right foot back a wee bit,' he said as he moved me into a better stance.

I started digging into it, feeling the weight of my punches judder up my arms and into my shoulders. The bag soon changed into the body of Plunk. He's having trouble taking the punishment. His body folds under the pressure. But Jimmy Mac doesn't let up. He keeps going until somewhere in the distance he can hear Fiona beg him to stop.

## Chapter Eighteen

An Adidas bag hung off Tommy's shoulders. His jacket had a patch on the arm that said New York Jets. He swaggered as if he was practising for the rough schemes down in London. He kept moving, past streetlights, following church wall until he stopped under a tree. He pulled a joint out of his pocket. It was a fat one shaped like a cone. It took him a few puffs to get it going. He savoured it like he was Winston Churchill or something. Then he nodded as he passed it to me.

It tasted kind of tangy. 'What is this?' I asked.

'Skunk,' he said.

The smoke hit my lungs like it was some sort of heavy fucking liquid. I could imagine it forcing its way through my blood and into my heart. It would get pumped up my neck and into my brain where it would explode in a rainbow of colour. It was that strong I was pure wrecked within a couple of minutes. I passed the joint back and leaned against the tree. I could almost feel the sap flowing like blood through a body. I looked up into the branches and they were all leafless and black. It was dead and wouldn't come back to life for a few weeks yet. It made me think of the bones of a hand, reaching upwards, all the flesh rotted off, or picked and eaten by birds and flies and maggots. The rest of the trunk was the arm of a giant of a fucking skeleton, the ribs curled up like the roots of the tree. And maybe a skull with big holes where the eyes used to be and giant pennies covering them.

Under the ground.

Dead.

Like my mammy.

Dead.

Like me and Fiona.

Dead.

I swallowed a big mouthful of saliva and looked at Tommy. He had another blast on the joint and frowned.

'What's the matter?'

'I got dumped.'

'What?'

'Fiona finished with me.'

'Why?'

‘I told her about sleeping round Martha’s.’

He glared at me. ‘Are you fucking stupid?’

‘But nothing happened.’

He put his arm round my shoulder. He steered me away from the wall and back onto the path.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ I said.

‘We need to get a drink into you.’

He bought me a lager and a packet of crisps. Then we walked over to the jukebox. We leaned on it as we pointed out some songs.

‘Any requests?’ said Tommy to one of the snooker players.

‘Maggie May.’

The other man potted a ball and looked up. ‘Aye,’ he said. ‘A bit of Rod Stewart to liven the night up.’

Tommy sniggered and leaned more into the glass. He pressed the button and the music started. When we’d picked a few songs we looked for a table. He liked to sit where he couldn’t be seen from the bar, so we tucked ourselves into the corner. I tried to be happy for him going away to a new life in London, but as I thought about him leaving, that started to bring me down as well. I blinked as I focused on the surface of the table. I tried to think of a joke or something. But I couldn’t. I nearly started fucking greeting. Tommy would have been sympathetic at the time but he would have never let me forget it. He’d have made a cunt of me for the rest of my fucking life.

Luckily, the twins turned up. When they walked into the Institute the guys at the snooker gawped at them. And no wonder. They looked like a couple of fucking criminals. Eddie had a black eye and George had a bit of cotton wool taped to his head.

‘It’s wee Shagger,’ said Eddie, his voice echoing.

‘So this is where you hang out,’ said George.

‘No wonder you want out of here,’ said Eddie.

George shook his head. ‘What a fucking shite-hole.’ He turned to me. ‘I’m surprised you’re not coming and all.’

Eddie raised his eyebrows. ‘Plenty of room in the motor.’

I looked at the foam stains on my glass. ‘I would like to.’

‘But he’s only fifteen,’ said Tommy.

‘Too young,’ said George.

‘Give us a shout after your birthday,’ said Eddie. He nodded to Tommy. ‘Are you ready for the off?’

Tommy nudged his bag with his toe. ‘Aye.’

George stood with his hands in his pockets and his feet apart. ‘Travelling light?’ he said. ‘That’s what we like to see.’

‘Sit yourself down,’ said Tommy. ‘And have a swallow.’

George looked at his watch. ‘We’ve no time for that,’ he said.

‘Especially after driving to this fucking dump,’ said Eddie.

George winked at me. ‘The dumb bastard is unable to catch a train.’

Eddie laughed and slapped Tommy’s arm. ‘We’re joking with you,’ he said. ‘We were passing through anyway.’

‘What sort of car are you in?’ I asked.

‘A Lexus,’ said Eddie.

‘Pure luxury,’ said George.

‘Do you want to have a look?’ asked Eddie.

The twins barged through the wooden doors of the exit and moved like arrows into the gloom. Eddie held up his key and clicked it. A set of lights flashed in the corner. The motor was black and low slung, like a cat that was ready to pounce. The smell of polish hit me when he opened the driver’s door.

‘Get in if you want,’ he said. ‘See how it feels.’

I wrapped my fingers round the steering wheel. Eddie bent over and showed me the controls. Then he handed the keys.

‘Start her up then.’

It pure jumped when the engine caught. I pushed the accelerator and the six cylinders purred and roared.

Eddie smiled at me. ‘It’s a fucking beauty eh?’

I got out and stood by the motor as the twins got in the front. Tommy shook my hand. ‘Will you be all right?’

I couldn’t say anything because I would have started to greet so I just nodded to him.



## Chapter Nineteen

The hedgerow was choked with vans and cars. People were all over the lane, streaming through the gate. A couple by the wall were looking at the brochure, the women drawing her finger down the writing, the man pointing at the house. Another man strolled around the garden like he was trying to measure it in steps. I watched him write in a notepad, then push the pencil behind his ear. He walked up to the living room window, cupped his hand against the glass and looked inside.

Suzanne looked at her watch. 'Fifteen minutes,' she said to me. 'Want to have a last look?'

When I walked into the kitchen I couldn't believe how shabby it looked. Nothing was there that I remembered. The table, the cooker and the fridge were all gone. Some of the wallpaper had been ripped back from the wall. It smelt as if somebody else was living there already. When I went up the staircase, I almost walked into a guy coming out of my mammy's room. It was him with the notepad. He nodded at me and squeezed past. I turned and watched him stretch up and pick at the plaster in the corner of the wall. A bit fell on the floor. He shook his head and tutted. When he walked away I noticed that his shoes were dirty. A big clump of muck was sticking out of the groove between the heel and the sole. I wondered if it would fall off before he went back outside.

As I stared at my mammy's door, I saw her in there, sucking in her last few breaths, her eyes big as lamps, but not that shiny. Dull as if the batteries were running out. I grabbed the handle and wanted to turn it and go in, but I couldn't face it. I went into my own instead. The only signs of the time I'd spent there was a bit torn off the corner of my Kurt Cobain poster. It was still stuck to the wall. There was a twisted fag paper laying on the floor next to the skirting board. I sat in the corner and stared at the twigs that curved against the window. They reminded me of my mammy's fingers, the knuckles swollen, and the wedding ring as loose as her skin.

I thought about how different things were since she died. The whole place was changing. Lorries were taking away the pit waste, diggers were moving over the yard and making it into some sort of park. The house I was brought up in was getting sold and converted into fuck knows what. And my mammy? She was lying in the ground getting fucking ate by fucking cunting maggots.

Suzanne called up the stairs. 'Are you there?'

I wiped my eyes and went into the hall. From outside, I could hear the agent starting on his spiel.

‘It gives me great pleasure to present to you this magnificent opportunity. A prime piece of land with outlined planning permission for five houses and three flats. Who’ll start me with fifty thousand?’

Suzanne leaned on the banister as she waited for me. When I got close to her I noticed her perfume. She smelled like my mammy. It made tears come back into my eyes.

‘Seventy thousand,’ came through the open door. ‘Come on ladies and gentlemen,’ said Leech. ‘I would be absent in my duty if I was to let this property go so cheaply’.

When we went through the kitchen I could almost smell baking. I saw my mammy next to the oven, putting the tea-towel on the handrail and picking up the bowl of mash for the hens.

‘Seventy-five,’ shouted Leech.

I tried not to greet, but I couldn’t help myself. My breath heaved and I stopped walking. I shuddered and the tears shot out of me.

Suzanne pulled me to her and held me tightly.

‘My baby,’ she said.

I rested my head on her shoulder and started greeting even harder.

‘My wee boy,’ she said.

We stood like that for ages. Eventually, I tried to move away but she wouldn’t let go. ‘My baby,’ she said.

I thought about her when I was a wean, handing me over to my mammy so that she could head off to Edinburgh and her course at the uni. I saw her in the city, meeting guys like Michael, all of them smiling and laughing and fucking drinking and dancing, while my mammy sat up nights looking after me. I saw the cunts smoking dope and going for trips, and her getting married and buying a house and earning good fucking money, and me still staying with an old dying woman in Stony Cross. And her getting weaker and fucking weaker, her body not able for it, her system getting that flimsy that when the cancer knocked at her door, she could do nothing but invite the cunt in. came in she was standing there with an open door just about welcoming the cunt into her fucking chest.

I pushed Suzanne away from me. She looked at me as if I'd just gave her a slap. 'You said you'd tell me who my da is.'

She snuffled and spoke in a whisper. 'I can't.'

'Come on to fuck,' I said. 'It's my fucking right to know.'

She blinked her eyes a couple of times. Then she looked down and said, 'Billy.'

The word worked its way into my brain and made the hairs rise on the back of my neck. I stepped away from her and peered at her face. 'Billy?' I said. 'Fucking Billy?' I moved further away from her. I raised my chin and glared at her. I spoke as if I was launching a punch into the heavy bag. 'You pair of fucking hypocrites,' I said.

Her eyes were rimmed in red.

'How the fuck could you?'

'I was young,' she said.

'But he was fucking married.'

'I didn't know any better.'

I stepped past her. 'Fuck off,' I said as I ran outside. At the garden gate I pushed past the agent. He was smiling as he came into the garden with the man who had been taking notes and picking at the walls.

'The new owner,' he said.

I didn't say anything. All I could do was keep moving. I ignored every other cunt I passed. them. I didn't want to talk to any of them. I stepped to the edge of the lane and jumped over the fence and into the woods. When I was under the cover of the trees, I sat on a root that was curling out of the ground. I gazed at the house that wasn't mine anymore. Suzanne came into the garden with the agent and the buyer. She shook their hands before turning and walking to the gate. She closed it with both of her hands and stood there for a few seconds. Suddenly, she pushed away from it. She quick stepped towards the car, her head bowed as if she was angry or ashamed of herself. I stood up to see the brake lights glow before she took a right onto the main road.

Fifteen minutes later, the new owner left in a transit van. The agent waved him off and got into his car. He didn't leave straight away though. I sneaked towards the fence until I could see the file leaning against his steering wheel. He moved a pen over it, as if it was his finger and he was slow at reading. Then he signed the bottom

and folded the paper. The car started. As it reversed next to the gate, he smiled to himself. It made me wonder how much he earned out of the sale.

When he'd finally fucked off, I crossed to the gate and held the wrought iron the same way Suzanne had. I looked at the house and wondered what was going through her mind. After a few seconds, I pushed myself away. But I didn't walk down the lane. I went to the hedge and kicked amongst the dirt. Eventually I found a stone the size of a tennis ball. I glanced up and down the lane to make sure no one was around. I swung my arm and chucked the cunt. It was that heavy it seemed to travel slowly towards the house, curling and twisting before crashing through my bedroom window. I brushed the dirt off my hands and started on the walk back to Andrew's.

Part Three

Spring

## Chapter Twenty

There were trees and bushes growing out of the pavement. The cars parked on the road were luxury ones like BMWs and Mercedes. The gate squeaked as we pushed through it. We climbed the steps. The doorknocker was a big brass one. The boom of it echoed through the walls and back out the window. I heard footsteps before this woman answered. She was a fancy looking sort, with dark clothes and nice hair. She had a cup of coffee in her hand. I could smell it on the warm air that was wafting out from the kitchen. A man was talking somewhere in the house.

Tommy said good morning and passed her the card. While she read it he started to give her the patter. He couldn't get work in Scotland. He'd tried but there wasn't any. So he'd decided to get on his bike and come down to London to make his fortune. He didn't want to spend his life scrounging the dole like his mates from school. He was going somewhere in life and this was just the start.

The woman held his card to her chest and nodded when he said work and the dole and going somewhere.

'Let's see what you've got then,' she said.

He dropped his bag on her step and flicked through the stuff. He started with the dearest thing he had, the ironing-board cover. 'Non-stick,' he said with a wink. 'Takes the work out of ironing.'

She laughed at this and put her cup on the window-sill. She bent down to look more closely. I saw right down the front of her shirt. Her necklace dangled between her breasts and I got a waft of perfume. It smelled sort of soft. Not like the stuff lassies from Stony Cross wear. This was lovely and made me think of warm sheets and dressing gowns and log cabins in the middle of the Norwegian forests. Before I knew it, I was thinking about her inviting me in and kissing me and pulling me onto her couch. My cock started to go hard, so I focused on the bag and what Tommy was saying.

'These oven gloves have got one of the chemicals NASA used on the space shuttle,' he said. 'You can grab a casserole dish for up to forty minutes before it burns your hands.'

She laughed again. 'All right,' she said. 'I'll take one.' She looked at me then back to Tommy. 'How much?'

'Five nicker.'

‘They’re a lot cheaper in the supermarket.’

‘But they don’t bring them to your door,’ said Tommy. He puffed up his chest. ‘And they don’t brighten your day with the witty banter of a Scottish charmer.’

She smiled and shook her head and turned to go back in the house. ‘I’ll just get my purse.’

When we were back on the street, he told me that if you can make them laugh you’re half way there. Especially women.

‘She was tasty,’ I said.

‘Not bad,’ he said. ‘But you meet some right crackers on this job.’

I glanced at the houses and thought about the women that might live behind all the net curtains. They would be classy ones around here. We were walking down a row of terraces. Not like the gaffs you get on Coronation Street. These were three storeys high and had bay windows. They were close together so you could pack them in without walking much between them. ‘And,’ said Tommy, like he was getting to the point, ‘these cunts from London want everybody to be earning a living, so if you tell them that’s what you’re here for, chances are they’ll give you a wee leg up.’

He stopped at the next house. ‘Are you ready to give it a go?’

I nodded.

He swung the gate open and pointed to the steps. ‘Get in there then.’

The man who answered had a pair of jeans on that were worn out at the knee. He wasn’t pure skint though because there was diamond ring on his pinky. I handed him my card and he played with his moustache as he read it. Tommy nudged me, so I started with the patter.

I told him I was trying to earn some money so that I could afford to go to uni when I left school. He nodded and said admirable as I went on about how one day I wanted to become a vet. I was starting to dry up when he asked me to show him what I was selling. I went through the stuff with some of what Tommy had said, but not as cheeky. I was chuffed when he picked up a packet of dusters. But it got better. He eventually stacked up an ironing board cover, a tea cosy, three dishcloths, and a packet of pegs. Fifteen quid it came to. He handed me a twenty-pound note. I was gutted because I didn’t have any change. But the cunt waved me away.

‘Keep it,’ he said, his arms filled.

‘Thanks mister.’

‘Put it towards your textbooks,’ he said as he closed the door.

Tommy was shaking his head as we left the guy's house. 'A natural,' he said. 'A fucking natural.' He grabbed me by the back of the neck and squeezed it. 'Well done wee man.'

I was that buzzed with it, I wanted to get to the next one. If I kept this up, I could live like Jimmy Mac and wear really dear suits, and have a ring like that guy on the door. When I walked down the street people would get wafts of my aftershave. I'd be that smart, birds like Flora would just want to be with me.

Tommy elbowed me as we got to the next door. 'Pay attention for fuck sake,' he said. A woman answered. She was the same age as my mammy. She had a cardigan on and a pearl necklace. She didn't look that pleased to see us. The old cunt snatched my card as if she was going to throw it in the bin. I started to give her the patter and she held her fucking hand up.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'I can't read and listen at the same time.'

It took her that long, I felt like just fucking off and going to find somebody that would actually want to buy something.

She looked at me when she'd finished with the card. 'What are you selling?'

I started with the story about school and going to uni, when she held her hand up again.

'I asked you a question.'

I looked at her then turned to Tommy. He nodded at my bag, so I opened it on the step. I got the bits out one at a time. I didn't try any flourishes or tell any lies. I just showed her the stuff and tucked it away. When I was finished she asked me my age.

'Eighteen.'

She frowned and I knew she didn't believe me. 'Does your mother know you're in London?'

'My mammy's dead.'

That must have made her feel like a right cunt. She started fidgeting with her pearls and glanced at me, then the bag, then back at me. I didn't say anything. I just stood there. Then she got her purse out. She spent a tenner. 'God bless you,' she said as we walked down the steps.

As we went to the next door, I could see that I'd maybe be good at this. Just knowing that gave me more confidence. Tommy told me that was the secret ingredient in the selling game. It's pure infectious. People see it in you, and it makes



them feel you're honest and that the stuff you're selling must be decent. But it wasn't a smooth ride. After a couple of hours people stopped answering their doors. Tommy said it was because the ones that didn't work would go shopping in the afternoon, and that our time would be better spent having a rest up and something to eat.

We walked to a parade of shops. I'd never had a kebab before, so Tommy said he would treat me. We ordered a donner each and a can of coke. The guy flashed a big knife as he cut meat from a spit. We sat on a bench under a tree and ate it. The pavement was wide and people were everywhere. There was some amount of different accents. A gang of lassies came out of the tube station. They were talking French. Two darkie guys sounded like their voices came from the back of their throats. Tommy said they were Arabs, but they weren't wearing sheets and that. Two black women got off a bus. There were fat as Tommy's ma. They sounded like they were from a reggae album.

Tommy smiled at me as I had another bite of my kebab.

'Do you like it here?'

'Fucking brilliant,' I said. 'It's like eating your dinner in front of the telly.'

When we were finished, we dropped the wrappings in a bin. Tommy said we could go to the park as it was so sunny. We headed along this road. The houses were big, painted white, some of the windows had steel bars on them. We passed another shop. It sold wellies and guns. There was a guy in there leaning on the counter. He didn't seem like the sort that would be buying that sort of stuff. More like he was on a fashion parade. He had sunglasses on and a pink jumper. I pointed him out to Tommy.

'Check that cunt'

'I know,' he said. 'What a fucking poof.'

We came to a junction that was packed out with traffic. Some of the motors were well nice. I spotted a Porsche with a woman driving. She was the image of Flora, gorgeous face with a tan and a silky dress clinging to her body. I stared at her, but she didn't even notice me. If I'd been Jimmy Mac, I would have vaulted the railings at the side of the pavement. He lands on the seat beside her, a wink in his eye and a smile on his lips.

How you doing doll?

Hello Jimmy, she says. Her eyebrow arches like it does in the magazine. Her dress rides up her thigh as she works the pedals. She takes them to a bijou apartment

in one of those secluded mews that you get on the telly. She puts on a Blur CD, and as the noise of Girls and Boys fills the room, she kisses him and drags him by the collar to her plush bed. Afterwards, they catch the Underground to Leicester Square. They eat spaghetti and drink Lambrusco. Then they go dancing in a Soho nightclub. It's there that she tells him they can escape together.

From what?

You'll see, she says.

'Come on,' said Tommy. We crossed the road and went under an arch into the park. Cherry trees lined the paths. They were hanging with blossom. We found a spot on the grass. Tommy lay down with his head on his holdall. He told me we had to be careful, because there were people around who would chore them.

'The cunts would have the trainers off your feet,' he said as he linked his arm into the handle. 'If we lost these it would cost us four hundred quid.' He looked at me. 'Each.'

'I thought we were insured.'

'We are, he said. 'But that doesn't matter. Sugar's had workers trying to rip him off for years. Anything goes missing, or gets choreed, we have to pay for it.'

I glanced round the park. 'That's not very fair.'

'It's a good policy,' he said. 'It makes sure we're fucking careful.' He patted the nylon. 'If any fucker wants this, they'll need to fight me for it.'

I hunched my shoulders and swung my fists. 'Well I'm up for it,' I said.

'I'll tell you what Jamie,' he said. 'You're looking fit.'

'Fucking right I am,' I said.

'How do you do it?'

'I'm keeping up the training.'

'And you'll be cutting down on the ganja.'

'I wouldn't go that far,' I said as I curled an uppercut into the air.

He pulled a packet of fags out of his bag. 'Just as well,' he said as he started to roll up a spliff. 'Because you'd have to say no to this.'

I stopped the exercises and sat on the ground. 'Where did you get that?'

He tapped the side of his nose.

'Don't give me your shite,' I said. Then I lay down and turned my back on him. 'I thought we were family. But if that's the way it is.'

I watched a flock of sparrows flying in and out of a cherry tree. They landed on the grass and scrambled with each other. I wondered if they were fighting over territory or fanny. Or both.

Tommy coughed as he puffed on the joint. He tapped me on the shoulder and passed it. He told me he'd got it from the twins.

'I've been doing a wee bit of night work with them,' he said. 'Holding the gear they're selling.'

'Gear?'

'Smack,' he said, as if it was nothing.

I just looked at him. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

'And crack.'

'Are you fucking kidding me?'

'I get a hundred bar a shift,' he said. 'And a wee bit of hash to take home.'

'You'll end up in the jail,' I said.

'They've got that covered.'

'Or getting shot off some fucking darkie.'

'It's not that bad.'

'You're pure fucking mental.'

He just rolled his eyes and wriggled his head into his bag. I didn't know what else to say to him, so I lay back down. Puffy white clouds drifted across the sky. A breeze blew across my arms and gave me goose bumps. I shuddered and pulled my jacket over my body. I gazed at the blossoms until they changed into swirling puffs of smoke. In the distance I heard a pneumatic drill. It sounded like a machine gun.

## Chapter Twenty One

On Friday evening I queued up in the kitchen for my wages. Sugar counted out a few tenners and held them out with a smile. 'Seventy quid.'

'I thought I was due a hundred.'

He looked at me as if I was daft and said something about administration charges. He also mentioned the bag insurance. And tax. While he spoke he kept smiling.

'But that's not fair.'

He frowned and scratched his big forehead. 'You're not listening to me,' he said. He tapped the notes against the table as he repeated the list of charges and tax.

'I don't pay tax,' I said. I waved round the room. 'And neither does any other cunt.'

He put his hands on the table and his eyes seemed to focus. 'You're not listening to me.'

'Come on Jock,' said some fucker in the queue behind me.

'But it's not fair,' I said again.

Sugar looked at me. His face went as still as a cat's. The room went pure quiet. The kitchen clock ticked out a couple of seconds. Sugar's finger twitched against the money on the table. Then he pounced. He knocked the table over as he crossed the space between us and swung a punch at my head. All the weeks I'd been training were squeezed into that moment. I ducked out of the way and gave him a dig on the side of his body. But the big cunt didn't even flinch. In fact, as he squared up to me, I could see that he was fucking loving it. His shoulders flexed and a heavy punch landed right into my stomach. The force of the fucking thing made me bend over. Then he banged me on the face and I went straight down. I was holding my guts as I curled up on the rug. The bastard kicked me on the back before shouting for the twins.

He rubbed his side and winced as Eddie arrived in the kitchen. 'Get this cunt out of here,' he said. 'Before I lose my fucking temper.'

The twins picked me up between them. They helped me through to the living room. I heard Eddie going, 'Wee Shagger.'

'He's got some balls sure,' said George.

They dropped me onto the couch and stood over me. Eddie smiled and shook his head. 'You're fucking stupid so you are.'

George went out and came back with a length of toilet paper. 'Clean yourself up,' he said as he threw it at me.

I wiped my nose and folded the blood into the tissue. 'Is that me getting the sack?'

Eddie sat next to me and put his arm over my shoulder. 'You're too good a salesman to lose that easily.'

George handed me a fold of tenners. 'So there's your wages.'

As I tucked them into my pocket, I could feel Eddie's breath on my ear. 'Sugar doesn't stand for any shite,' he said, his fingers digging into my skin.

George leaned close to my face. 'He's killed boys like you with his bare hands.'

'Think about that the next time you want to run off at the fucking mouth.'

The next morning it was raining. I was walking along a wet pavement, watching my feet step in front of each other, over cracks in the cement and the odd fag end. I was in an estate of semis. The cars parked on the road were Fords and Volkswagens and Toyotas. I wasn't doing that well. I'd only sold two dusters and a pair of oven gloves. I turned into a drive that had a big white van parked on it. There was ladders attached to its roof. As I got close to the porch, a dog barked inside. By the time I got to the step, I could hear its claws against the door. A woman came answered my knock. She held an Alsatian's collar as it grunted and tried to wedge its head through the gap. I gulped as I gave her the patter. She seemed interested so I opened the bag. When I took out the dusters, the dog snapped at my hands, its teeth clicking together like some sort of fucking mantrap. The woman said she was sorry, she knew he was a danger, but she still didn't shut the cunt inside. I felt its breath on me as I went through the rest of the stuff. I tried not to flinch every time the cunt growled.

By the time I was finished she hadn't made her mind up. I remembered what the man next door had said, so I told her I would ask my parents for money to help me out, but the fact was that my mammy had just died.

'So it's just me,' I said.

For a couple of seconds I watched her blink as if she was going to start fucking greeting or something. But then her face puckered like she could smell shite.

Her eyes glittered as she frowned at me. 'How low are you?' she asked. 'How can you come out with such lies?' The dog's ears perked up. The growling deepened into a snarl. It started to bounce against her grip on its collar. 'Go on,' she said, pointing at the path. 'Get out of it before I let him off.'

She gave the collar enough slack that the cunt got part way outside. Its claws were scrabbling as it fought for grip on the floor. My heart was pounding as I packed the bag. I zipped it shut and hurried towards the gate. Even though I hadn't been lying, I could feel a blush inch up my neck and onto my cheeks. I didn't go to any of the other doors in the street. I just kept my head down and kept walking. When I got to the corner, I looked back and she was still standing in front of her porch, the dog sitting by her side.

When the van picked me up at two, I sat up the back. Every other cunt was buzzing about going out for the night and having a lie in on Sunday. I didn't even feel like talking to them. I had to wipe the window to see outside. As I watched the roads and the traffic, I thought about that cunt Sugar. He must be earning a fortune with the drugs he was selling, yet he wanted to screw every last penny out of cunts like me. I saw him again, rising from the kitchen table. But this time I'm prepared. I duck under his clumsy punches and get a couple of digs into his kidneys. The force of them slows him right down. I get some jabs onto his chin, strong ones that set his face up for a right cross. That makes made his eyes roll. He falls to the floor.

I was going to kick him in the stones, but the mini-bus juddered as we pulled into the drive. We piled inside and queued up in the stock room, waiting for the twins to sort through the bags and write up the inventory. Eddie tutted as he entered my figures into a hardback book.

'A boy with your talent can do better than this.'

When he was finished, I turned to go, but George grabbed me by the arm.

'The boss wants a word.'

Sugar was in the kitchen, sitting by the table. He swigged from a mug as I went in. Then he held it out to me. 'Fill that up, will you?'

I wondered if he was going to give me another doing. I was that keyed up when I turned from the pot, if he'd raised his hands, I'd have chucked the hot coffee right in the cunt's face. But the fucker was smiling at me. I wondered what the fuck he was playing at. He seemed relaxed. He said thanks and then pointed at the other chair. My guts churned as I pulled it out and sat down.

His eyes narrowed. 'Have we sorted out the misunderstanding about your wages?'

I couldn't do anything but nod my head. 'I suppose so.'

'We should have been clearer at the start,' he said. 'About the admin charges.'

I nodded again.

'How's your face?'

'All right.'

'The old temper.'

I didn't say anything.

He pointed at the wall between the kitchen and the living room. I looked at the clock that hung there. 'I've been dealing with deadbeats for years,' he said. 'So I can be a bit quick with my fists. Do you know what I'm saying?'

I nodded.

'But I shouldn't have done that to you,' he said.

He had a drink and put the mug back on the table. He frowned at me. 'You seem the sort of lad that wants to get on.'

'I suppose.'

'And you're a tough wee bastard,' he said as he rubbed his side.

I wondered if he was being sarcastic.

He put his hands behind his head. The chair creaked as he leaned back. 'Do you want to earn some real money?'

## Chapter Twenty-Two

My fingers were sore with holding the bag. There wasn't much in it, but it felt like it weighed a fucking ton. I swapped it onto my other hand.

'Check these out,' said Tommy.

Coming out of a boozer was this bunch of lassies. It was obviously a hen night or something because one of them had a gold miniskirt on and an L-plate tied round her neck. They were all well tasty with high heels and that.

Tommy put on a swagger as we got closer. 'All right girls?' he said.

The one that was getting married whistled. She grabbed him and kissed him. Her pals clapped their hands and cheered. Tommy smiled at me when they broke apart. Then the woman turned at me.

'OK son, come on then.'

She got me by the jacket and gave me a kiss. She pushed her tongue right into my mouth. I could hear the other ones shout when she grabbed me between the legs. Then she pushed me away and her and her pals staggered off down the pavement. Tommy called after them. One turned and said it was late and we should go home. They were looking for men not boys.

'You fucking whores,' he shouted.

'Piss off,' said the one that kissed us.

'That was no real,' he said to me.

'I know,' I said. 'This place is pure mental.'

'Good laugh though eh?'

'Aye.'

We walked down to the end of the street. He got the pager out of his pocket to check if Eddie or George had been in touch.

'Nothing,' he said.

'It's a bit slow isn't it?'

'It's always like this at the start of the night,' he said.

We stopped at a window display. It was filled with women's pants and bras and that. It looked like the sort of stuff that Flora wore, red and black stockings and high-heeled boots. The model was leaning forward with her bum sticking out. Tommy made a motion with his finger and said he'd like to stick it in her dirt box. We laughed as we moved away from the shop.



I wasn't looking where I was going so didn't see the two policemen who came round the corner. I almost walked right into them.

'Steady,' said one copper.

Tommy took me by the elbow and tried to lead me past.

The big one stepped in our way. He nodded at me. 'Are you all right?' he asked, his hand on the radio that was pinned to his lapel.

'He's fine,' said Tommy.

I repeated the words, letting the bag dangle by my side. Ready to drop it and run for the corner.

'What age are you?'

'Eighteen,' I said without a stutter.

'Me as well,' said Tommy.

'Where are you from?' asked the other copper. He was Scottish.

'Stony Cross,' we said together.

'Rangers boys are you?'

'Aye.'

He smiled. 'What are you doing down here?'

'We work out in Hounslow,' said Tommy. 'Selling dusters.'

'Is that right?'

'Aye.'

He frowned as he looked at me. 'Have you been fighting?'

'He's a boxer,' said Tommy.

'Is that right?'

I nodded.

He shimmied as if he was going to give me a fucking punch. I was that surprised I didn't move. 'You've not got very good reactions,' he said.

'I'm quick in the ring.'

'Let me see.'

I started to swing into the air, but the bag twisted and banged against my arm. I went to pass it to Tommy, but the policeman stuck his hand out. 'I'll hold that for you.'

'It's all right,' said Tommy. 'I'll get it.'

The policeman snatched it. 'You're making me suspicious here,' he said.

'What's in the fucking thing?'

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘Doesn’t feel like nothing.’

‘Just some messages,’ said Tommy.

‘Something to eat and that,’ I said.

‘Is that all?’

‘And a can of juice,’ said Tommy.

The police lifted it up and had a look in. My stomach lurched and I felt like running for it. The other copper must have noticed, because he reached his hand out and grabbed me by the sleeve. ‘Steady,’ he said.

My heart pounded as the Scottish copper flicked through the messages in the bag. He looked at his pal. ‘Two apples, two oranges, and two fucking Mars Bars,’ he said. Then he turned to me. ‘And a paper poke filled with sweeties.’ He held it up. As he opened it, I could see right into the future.

Three years, says the Judge.

Suzanne cries. But your honour.

Drugs are a pestilence on the streets of this country, says the judge. We need to send out a strong message that they are unacceptable.

I’ll appeal, Suzanne tells me as the jailers grab me by the arms and lead me down the stairs.

The Scottish copper wrapped the paper up and tossed it back in the bag. ‘All you need is a portion of chips,’ he said as he held it up. ‘And this shite will be the best dinner you’ve ever had.’

The other one let go my arm and laughed. I rubbed my elbow.

The Scottish one glanced round the street. He pointed to the ground. ‘This here,’ he said ‘Is my fucking patch.’ He gripped me by the lapels of my jacket and pulled my face close to his. ‘If I see you causing any bother, you’ll fucking regret it.’ He gave me a shake. ‘Are you listening to me, you wee cunt?’

I nodded but didn’t say anything.

‘Get out my fucking sight,’ he said.

The muscles in my legs were twitching with the urge to run. But I didn’t. I kept a steady pace until we were round the corner.

‘I thought we were fucked there.’

‘They don’t care about us,’ said Tommy.

Ten minutes later, the beeper went on the pager. Tommy read it and said we had to walk towards Seven Dials. On the way there we ducked behind a van. Tommy got one of the parcels out of the sweetie bag. He told me he would hold it in his hand so he could pass it over easily. He tapped his nose.

‘Because you never know who’s fucking watching.’

We were nearly there when Eddie stepped out from the doorway of some offices. He grabbed the packet as he walked passed us and said ‘Later,’ out of the side of his mouth. The rest of the night it was one page after another. We met one of the twins at different tube stations, or street corners. The cunts always surprised me. I’d hear a whistle, or the hoot of an owl, and they’d would step out of an alleyway, or from behind a motor. One time George got off a fucking bus. He jogged right past us. I thought he hadn’t even seen us, but Tommy gave him the gear all right.

By half past midnight the bag was empty. Tommy got a message to meet them at the market. When we got there, the whole street was fucking empty. We stood by this stall that had a tattered bits of canvas hanging from the spars. Old fruit boxes were stacked up next to the bins. I heard a shout and the twins came running down the street.

‘Shankill boys we are here, shag your women and drink your beer.’

George kicked one of the piles of crates. He singled one out and sent it skittering up the pavement. Then Eddie cut in and launched it towards the other kerb.

‘One nil to Linfield,’ he shouted.

He put his arm on my shoulder and we walked towards an archway and through a tunnel that had a sex shop in it.

‘Heard you had some fucking trouble with the police.’

‘I thought the cunts were going to pull me.’

He patted me. ‘Sure, you handled it.’

‘He did that,’ said George.

‘Both of you,’ said Eddie.

‘So we’ve a wee treat for you,’ said George.

‘What?’

‘You wait and see,’ said George.

When we came out the other side, lights were flashing from the signs above the shops and the clubs. One said, ‘Girls.’ Another had a picture of a woman resting in a glass, her legs dangling over the side. Considering how late it was, there were a

lot of people about. We cut into another alleyway. It was stinking of pish. The walls were streaked with bird shit. There was a stack of bins in the corner. This old drunk guy lay twisted amongst the black bags.

‘Look at the fucking state of your man there,’ said George.

‘We should set fire to him.’

‘The dirty cunt.’

Eddie led us down a set of steps and into a doorway that glowed purple against the brickwork. A man stood in our way. He had a suit on and a bow tie. He looked like a gangster in a film. He nodded as if he knew Eddie. He told us there was to be no trouble. George said sure you know us. The guy grimaced, but he stepped aside and let us in. It was that dark I could hardly see across the room. A couple of red lights shone over the middle of the floor. An old blond woman polished glasses behind a bar. A younger woman came through beaded door and under a sign saying Fire Exit. She smiled as she walked towards us. She had long dark hair and wore a miniskirt that hardly covered her knickers. Her legs were tanned and slim like Flora’s. A white waistcoat pushed her tits up. She spoke to Eddie, and then led us to a booth. We sat on these plush seats that went in a semi-circle round a table.

‘Four halves of lager,’ said Eddie.

When she went to get them, the twins leaned into the cushions with their legs spread and their elbows out. I copied them. George passed the fags out. He lit his up and glanced around as he had a deep puff. He smiled when he caught me looking at him.

‘Rewards of the game,’ he said.

Eddie elbowed me in the side. ‘Fucking dead on eh?’

‘I mean you could be in the cells right now,’ said George. ‘Think about that.’

‘With a fucking conspiracy charge hanging over you,’ said Eddie.

‘And the peelers?’

‘Some of them are all right.’

‘But most of them are not.’

‘They’d pressure the fucking shite of you.’

‘You’d maybe even consider risking your life by telling tales on the boys.’

Flora came back with a tray of glasses. She leaned over the table, looking everybody in the eye and smiling as she passed the drinks. When I got mine, she winked at me. Her eyelashes beat together like the wings of a fucking butterfly.

Eddie took her hand in his. He whispered something in her ear. She smiled as if she fancied him. He leaned back and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘How much for a dance?’

‘Twenty.’

‘What about a fucking ride?’ asked George.

‘I don’t do that.’

‘Sure,’ said Eddie.

George pulled out the money and gave it to her. He pointed at me. ‘Show the boy a good time.’

‘He’s a bit young,’ she said.

‘Old enough to give you a sore arse,’ said Eddie.

She tucked the cash into the top of her stocking. Then she bent over me and shook her chest. She pressed a button on the side of the booth and music came out. As she danced, I could see her walking along the streets of Soho. Men staring at her, but she’s ignoring them. She’s searching for Jimmy Mac. When he appears in front of her, she flashes her eyes.

Where are we going?

Some bar that I know.

He takes her through the doorway and the music rips into them. They can’t help but move to the beat. Drinks come in tall glasses, bits of lime in it. And ice cubes. And tropical liquor like Bacardi poured from a bottle with a steel spout. After a few sips, they glide through the crowded room, lifting their interlocked fingers over the heads of diners and drinkers. They snake between tables and chairs until they reach the dance floor. He puts his hand on her waist and she moves her hips like they were honey.

What happened to you? she asks as she touches his cheek.

He tells her about Sugar. She kisses the bruises.

I’ll get my revenge, he says.

He’s a big man, she says. Are you sure you want to try?

I’ll be able to sort him out.

They’ll come after you.

By that time, he says. I’ll be long gone.

Where?

Back home, he says. Where there’s folk I can trust.

I wish I could come with you, she says, as she grinds her body against me, her hot breath on my neck, and her fingers scratching the skin of my back.

The music stopped and the lust disappeared from her eyes and lips. She turned to Eddie and asked if there was anything else. He shook his head and she left the table. She headed for the bar and leaned across to speak to the old bar maid. She was poured a drink. She rested her bum against a stool and swigged the whole lot down. She looked round the club and caught me staring at her. She kissed her palm and blew it at me. Then she stepped towards the fire exit and disappeared into the darkness behind it.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

‘Andrew?’

‘Is that you son?’

‘Aye.’

‘Are you eating all right?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘How can you be fine at your age?’ he asked. ‘Suzanne’s been on to the police.’

‘What for?’

‘She’s worried about you.’

‘But I’m sixteen.’

‘That’s what they told her. There’s nothing they can do.’

We didn’t say anything for a few seconds. As I listened to the rattle of his breathing I watched Tommy take the pager out of his pocket and walk over to the kerb as he read it. Then Andrew coughed and started to speak.

‘When are you coming home?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What about school?’ he asked. ‘The exams are at the end of next month.’

‘I’ll worry about that later.’

He didn’t say anything but I could imagine him twisting the cord round his fingers as he thought of something that would convince me.

‘Have you had the letters?’ I asked.

‘They’re safe in my tin.’

‘You can help yourself if you need to.’

‘I wouldn’t take your money.’

‘Are you getting to the shop all right?’

‘Billy’s been doing that for me.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I kicked at the door of the booth.

‘Jamie?’

‘What?’

‘I saw Fiona yesterday,’ he said. ‘She was asking after you.’

‘So?’

‘You should give her a call.’

I pressed my finger against a burn mark in the Perspex. It reminded me of the bus shelter in Stony Cross. 'She'll not want to talk to me.'

'Why don't you try?'

'Do you think she misses me?'

'It was written all over her face.'

'Maybe I will then.'

'You do that.'

Tommy banged on the door. He mouthed that we needed to go. I nodded to him before turning back to the phone.

'Andrew?'

'What?'

'See if anything happens.'

'Like what?'

'Oh nothing.'

'What's going on down there?'

'Nothing.'

'Doesn't sound like it.'

'The money's running out,' I said. 'I'll talk to you later.'

I heard him call my name as I hung the phone up.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

There was a tree in the garden. It was growing out of a pattern of stonework. It looked like it had just came back from the hairdressers. I climbed the steps and rattled the knocker. This woman came to the door. She had a dressing gown on. Her hair was dark. She was really good looking for an old thing. When I held my card up she smiled as she took it. I rattled out the patter and she nodded for me to open the bag. I told her the ironing board cover was made in Britain.

‘This one has a Teflon coating,’ I said as I brought out the deluxe cover. ‘Gets your clothes perfectly smooth. And that sets off a slim figure like yours to its best advantage.’

She smiled again and this time I saw some of her teeth. They were pure white. ‘Right you’ve sold it,’ she said. She held the door open. ‘But you’ll have to come in. I’ll need you fit the bloody thing.’

I followed her into the hall. The radio was on somewhere in the back of the house. De la Soul were playing that song about Jennifer. I stepped to the beat of it as I walked behind her and gazed at the way her sandals slapped against her feet. The sight of them made my belly feel empty. She pointed to the cupboard under the stairs.

‘It’s in there,’ she said.

We went into the living room and stood in front of this huge fireplace. It had a wooden surround.

‘You’ve got a gorgeous accent,’ she said. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Glasgow.’

I unwrapped the cover and held it up. There was two bits of string hanging out of the bottom. I’d never put one on before but it seemed easy enough. I wondered why she couldn’t manage it herself.

‘How long have you been in London?’ she asked.

Her knee was poking out of the folds of her dressing gown. The belt hung at her waist. ‘Two weeks,’ I said as I moved my gaze up past her tits to her face.

Her eyes were blue, but they had flecks of brown in them. ‘It’s a great city,’ she said with a smile. ‘A handsome young man like you should do very well.’

I stretched the cover onto the board and straightened it. Then I smoothed it towards the back. I told her to hold it in place so that I could tie it on. She bent forward and I saw one of her nipples touch the side of her gown. The smells wafting

from her made my pulse rattle in my throat. My cock started to move against my pants.

Jimmy Mac looks at Flora. Her cheeks flush as they fill with blood. Her lips part and her pupils dilate. His cock strains against his jeans.

What are you looking at? she asks, her eyes flicking to his crotch.

Jimmy straightens up. You.

Her tongue moves till it sits between her lips. Jimmy can't resist it any longer. He reaches for her and grabs the front of her dressing gown. He pulls her close for a kiss.

The woman frowned at me but didn't pull her face away. 'Darling, don't do that,' she said.

'Sorry,' I said and looked at the floor. I stared at a silver ring that encircled her second biggest toe.

'Can we get on with this?' she asked.

I coughed and tried to concentrate on the strings. My cheeks burned as I pulled them tight. It took me ages to fumble them into a knot. When they were done I stood up. I couldn't look her in the eye. She ran her hands over the board and said I had done a good job. Then she told me to put it back in the cupboard.

I waited by the front door as she fetched the money. She gave me a tenner. 'Keep the change,' she said and turned the latch. She told me to take care. I lifted my bag onto my shoulder and climbed down the steps. A cold wind hit me as the door closed behind me.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

The lane was narrow and stunk of rubbish. It had double yellow lines down it. Drainpipes covered the walls. There were only a couple of small windows, both of them were manky with soot. We stepped past a stack of beer crates. Eddie nodded at an entranceway that was half covered by wire mesh. He said it led into a club for poofs, but they didn't open till later. He leaned against the aluminium door. He told me that from now on Tommy was to be holding the gear, and I would be collecting the money. If we met in our wanderings we were to act as if we didn't know each other. He gave me a pager and showed me how to work it. He said the procedure was pretty much the same as before. I'd get a message to meet somewhere, and one of them would give me some cash. He gave me a money-belt and told me to strap it to my waist.

'Keep it out of fucking sight.'

He fucked off back the way we had came. I watched his hunched shoulders until he turned the corner and was out of sight. Then I headed out. Within a few minutes, I saw a lassie taking a piss in the gutter. Her knickers were at her ankles and one of her mates held her so she didn't fall into her own fucking puddle. I even saw the whore's fanny. Her pal saw me watching and asked what I was staring at. I was going to tell her to fuck off but the pager bleeped and I had to move. The message sent me to the fountains at Centrepont. When I got there, George stepped away from a group of people waiting to cross the road. He had his head down and I didn't think he had seen me. I was going to call his name as he walked past, but his hand reached out and I took the wad of notes. I was glad I hadn't shown myself up by saying anything.

I tucked the money into the belt as I battled through the crowds on Oxford Street. As I crossed the road at Soho Street, a police van screamed past, skidding round the corner and nearly hitting the people who spilled from the pavement onto the road.

'Watch out,' said a greasy looking guy who was leaning on the barrier. He had the skin of a fucking alligator. He could have been resting in that big brown river that crosses the Serengeti, half out of the water. The only sign of life was the blink of his eyes. The cunt was staring at me, and I couldn't look away. He asked me to spare him the price of a cup of tea.

‘Only fifty pence mate, go on, it’s nothing to you.’

I wrenched myself away from him, but the cunt followed me all the way down to the square. He went on about being an old soldier who’d fought in the Falklands.

‘Not to mention three tours in Northern Ireland,’ he said. ‘That deserves a bit of respect, doesn’t it mate?’

When I got to the railings, I stopped and turned to look at him. His clothes were manky. He was stinking of drink. He stumbled as he leaned towards me and grabbed me by the sleeve.

‘Come on mate,’ he said.

I should have been scared, but I wasn’t. I wrenched my arm and pushed him away from me. ‘Get to fuck,’ I said as he fell against a car. He almost tumbled to the ground, but managed to grab at the mirror and hold himself up. ‘All right fellow,’ he said. ‘I get the picture.’

‘You fucking cunt,’ I said.

As I walked away, he called after me. Said I was a disgrace to the memory of all the men dead on Goose Green. I kept moving. The pager bleeped when I came to a display of violins in a music shop window. I glanced back up the street, but I couldn’t see the guy. Then I turned into a passage that would lead me to Berwick Street.

The belt was thick with money. Drizzle soaked into my hair and shoulders. I started thinking about that big police from Scotland. Getting arrested and having the shite kicked out of me as they asked where the fuck did I get all that money. And maybe the fucker taking it all and putting me out the door in the morning with nothing in my pockets, wondering what the fuck I was going to say to Sugar when I saw him. I heard his voice echoing in my ear, telling me about the deadbeats he’d worked with and how violence was the only thing they understood. Then I started to think about the hammering he gave me in the kitchen. I saw him pounce from his chair like a leopard. But this time I’m ready for the cunt. I don’t go down easy. I duck and twist as he closes on me, so that my blows connect properly. A left into his guts and a right into his kidneys. His hands come down to protect his body and I launch into a set of combinations that get him on the neck and face.

I watched my reflection in a sex shop window as Jimmy battles against him. Sugar’s a fucking strong opponent. When Jimmy hurts him with a direct blow on the nose, he seems to expand with anger. His fighting gets desperate, like some sort of

wounded lion trying to fend off a gang of hyenas. Jimmy swivels his head from side to side, and avoids most of the punches. He tucks his jaw into his chest and goes on the offensive. Slowly, he grinds the big fucker to a standstill.

I heard a wolf whistle. I stopped fighting and turned round. There was two lassies standing on the pavement behind me. They were sheltering under this wee umbrella. One of the cows shrieked and giggled as she pointed at me.

‘Check it out,’ she said. ‘It’s the fucking champ.’

I started to take a reddie, so I ducked into the shop to get away from the pair of whores. I stood by the vibrators next to the glass door and gave them the fingers. One of them shook her wrist in a wanker sign before they huddled together and moved off. They were still laughing. When they were gone, I had a quick swatch round. Some old man with bicycle clips on his trousers was flicking through a tray of videos. A punky looking guy in a leopard print shirt was standing behind the counter. He frowned as he stared at me over the Johnnies.

‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m just fucking browsing,’ I said. ‘Is that all right?’

He looked away so I moved to the scud books that were housed in an alcove at the far end of the shop. As I glanced along the racks, one headline caught my eye.

Foxy Flora Bares All.

My pulse thumped in my neck as I picked up the magazine. I held it in my hands for a few seconds before opening it and scanning the list of contents. It told me she was featured over five pages, including the centre spread. I flicked through until I came to the beginning of the pictures. A bit of writing in the corner said she was modelling to help pay for her tuition at a secretarial college, but that she would stop soon to start a family. The shot of her was pure fucking lovely. She was sitting on the bonnet of a Jaguar with her legs open. It was tasteful though, because she had some clothes on, a bikini top and a pair of cut down jeans. In the next lot she had unbuttoned the shorts to show off a thin strip of fanny hair. After that she took off the bikini, and then she was in the total fucking buff. I thumbed open the centre spread. My breath stopped when I saw her. She was leaning back in a chair. High heels were dangling off her feet. She had a cowboy hat on her head and a diamond ring in her belly button. I looked round at the shop to make sure the punk guy wasn’t hovering near me. Then I held the glossy image close to my face and looked deep into her green eyes.

I was wondering when I would see you, she says, her lips shining in the studio lights.

You're looking gorgeous, says Jimmy.

Well thank you, she says, her eyelashes fluttering.

How long have you been here?

Feels like forever, she says. She stares out of the page with a questioning look.

What are you up to?

I'm going to see Sugar.

Her forehead creases. Good luck, she says.

Do you still want to come back to Scotland with me?

She nods.

He tells her she should make her way to Euston Station, that he'd meet her there after he squares things up with Sugar.

You be careful, she says.

He's about to tell her he would, when the pager beeped. I slid her back into her place with the other women then moved towards the exit of the shop. The punk guy glared at me as if I'd fucking choreed something. I got my head down and hurried past the vibrators. When the door clanged behind me I read the message. It sent me to St Giles church. The drizzle changed to rain as I stomped my way past the Coach and Horses. Wetness oozed through my jacket and down my neck and back. I moved as fast as I could, passing people cowering under coats and brollies. One guy held a paper over his head. The fucking prick.

Jimmy pushes his face into the rainy night. He steps through a group of people arguing over a taxi. From the other side of the road, a woman crosses. She's wearing a long leather coat. When she gets closer, he sees it's Flora. She smiles at him as she edges through the idiots and slips into the back of the cab. She leans towards the driver and they move into the murk. Jimmy keeps walking. He focuses on the righteous punches he's going to bounce off the head of Sugar. Revenge is a dish best served cold, he says to himself as he follows the action from the punch up to the escape. As soon as he's avenged himself, he'll disappear into the crowds. By the time any of Sugar's mates turn up, he'll be sitting with Flora on the night train to Glasgow.

When he turns the corner, he wipes his forehead and stares into the haziness. He can just make out the Lexus. Sugar's standing next to it, facing the railings, pissing into the churchyard. Jimmy peels back his coat and drops it on the pavement.

He doesn't want it getting in the way of his fists. He strides quicker then breaks into a run for the last few steps. Sugar shakes himself off and turns round a moment too late. Jimmy Mac leaps into the air to launch his punches and kicks.

Big drops of rain splashed against my face. Traffic sloshed through puddles. A police siren echoed against the buildings, getting louder and louder until it passed me in a flashing scream. When the howling dwindled, I noticed a movement in the gloom. I stared into the night and saw it was a couple of men walking towards me. Black faces poked from their hoods. They seemed to take up the whole of the pavement. One of them smiled as he stepped into my path. I saw his lips moving before I heard his voice.

'Have you got a match?'

'Sorry I don't smoke.'

'Cold night isn't it bruv?' said the short stocky one.

I didn't realise he was crowding me until I had to step backwards. Then the cunt attacked me. 'Give us the fucking money,' he said as his punches hit my face and body. It was like I was a heavy bag receiving hooks and uppercuts, his nose hissing with the force. The streetlights started spinning and the next thing I knew, I was on the floor. I didn't give a fuck about the cash by then. I was too busy trying to protect my body from their shoes. The tall one grabbed the belt and yanked it. He hacked at it with a Stanley until he managed to cut it free. It dangled from his hand like the guts of a fucking chicken.

'Bingo,' he said when he checked inside.

The stocky man gave me another couple of kicks. 'Stupid Irish cunt.'

When they fucked off, I dragged myself to my feet and staggered towards the meeting. I shouted when I saw Sugar. He flicked his fag through the railings of the churchyard. He turned to Bunty and pointed to the dead end. 'Get the fucking motor,' he said. Bunty sprinted with his head forward. Sugar looked up and down the street before stepping off the pavement.

'What the fuck happened?' he asked as he crossed. He was frowning as he stared at me.

'Two darkies jumped me,' I said. 'They took all the fucking money.'

'Where did they go?'

I pointed towards the main drag. He grabbed me by the elbow and we ran along the pavement. 'What the fuck did the cunts look like?'



‘One was short and stocky and one was tall.’

‘What were they wearing?’

‘Hoodies,’ I said. ‘They had hoodies on.’

‘Sure, that cuts it right down.’

The Lexus skidded next to us. ‘Get in the fucking motor.’ As I climbed through the door, he pushed me and jumped in beside me. ‘What way?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What a useless cunt you are,’ he said. He patted Bunty on the shoulder. ‘They might try for the Tube,’ he said. The car raced down to the lights. When we stopped, Sugar pointed at the folk next to the crossing and told me to watch for the cunts. A lot of the people had their heads covered by hoods, but I didn’t see anyone who even looked like them. The traffic moved and we travelled in the flow down to the station. Bunty pulled a right and stopped next to a black cab. Sugar told me to get out. As we jogged down the stairs, I glanced over the stalls selling keys and sandwiches and flowers. I scanned the faces in the crowds. There was no sign of them. Sugar cut through the people and into the concourse. It was bright in there, the lights gleaming against the cream tiles. He pushed me against the part of the wall next to a map of the Underground. He told me to watch as cunts came up to the barriers. There was loads of them. They pulled down their hoods, shook out brollies and brushed rain from their coats. My heart jumped when I saw a couple of darkies. But, when they got closer, I could see they were wearing suits.

As I watched, Sugar tapped his foot against the floor and folded his arm across his chest. He turned to have a look himself. I saw the back of his head move as he shook it. He spun back round to face me.

‘Anything?’

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘Sorry,’ I said.

He banged his fist against a ticket machine. Then he pushed me back up the stairs and hustled me into the motor. Bunty pulled a U-Turn and gunned along the main road. We skidded into Soho, the exhaust a screaming echo against the brick walls. Sugar got angrier and angrier when I didn’t spot the guys. As I tried to focus on the blurs of faces, I fucking knew we wouldn’t find them. I started to think about Fiona. I wished I’d called her when Andrew told me to. She would have made me go back to Stony Cross.



After another ten minutes of searching, Sugar paged the twins. We met them outside this boozer in Noel Street. They were standing between the pillars at the doorway, hiding from the rain. Tommy was there as well. He looked as if he was shitting himself. They came over to the motor. Sugar told them what happened and made me give them a description of the men. He told them to keep their eyes peeled. Then he nodded at Tommy.

‘And don’t let this cunt out of your sight,’ he said to Eddie. ‘I want to have a wee word with him later, so I do.’

He sat back in his seat and rubbed his temples. ‘I don’t need this fucking shite,’ he said. He scratched at his chin for a few seconds before sighing. ‘I know who might have done this.’ He drummed his fingers on his thigh. ‘I’m not a hundred percent, but we’re going to have to send them a fucking message.’ He turned to look at me. ‘Otherwise the cunts will be hammering us every fucking week.’

He told Bunty to take us up to King’s Cross. On the way we sat in silence. All I could hear was his breathing. It sounded like he’d been for a run, or had a couple of rounds in the ring. After a couple of minutes I couldn’t resist glancing at him. His face was like a lump of concrete you could break bottles on.

‘What the fuck are you looking at?’

I went back to staring at the floor and my jeans and the space of the car seat between my legs.

When we got to the station he told Bunty to head up to the flats. ‘No hurry now,’ he said. As the car drove past some terrace houses that had been converted into hotels, he rolled the window down. Noise from the streets came into the car, an echoing siren, the revving of a motorbike, a man shouting. When the car drew up next to the pavement, Sugar reached under the front seat. He pulled out a pistol. He looked at me as he pushed it into the waistband of his trousers.

‘One thing you’ll learn about me son,’ he said. ‘I don’t fuck around.’ He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled into the night. A darkie about my age came from behind a wall. He glanced up into the rain. Then he grimaced and shook his head.

‘Yeah?’

‘Could you sort me out with couple of stones?’ asked Sugar in an English accent. He turned to face me and fucking smiled. The cunt even winked at me.

The boy stretched his neck to look round the street. Then he pushed a small white package out from between his teeth. ‘Let me see your fucking cash.’

Sugar pushed the door open and stepped onto the pavement. He held out a twenty-pound note. He spoke like he wasn't sure of himself. 'Will you give me three for that?'

'Fuck off.'

Sugar bent his head as if he was a schoolboy in trouble. 'Just make it two.'

The boy sucked his tooth as he snatched at the note. When he was putting it in his pocket, Sugar jumped him. He threw kicks and punches that knocked the boy backwards. I heard the car door click and realised Bunty had climbed out of the driving seat. The two of them got the boy to the floor and kicked him on the head and body. When they eventually stopped, the boy pushed himself along the ground until he was jammed against the wall. He felt for his ears and his neck. Sugar glanced around before he pulled out his pistol. He made a show of cocking and pointing it. The boy held his hands over his head as if he could protect himself from the bullet.

'Don't shoot,' he said. 'Please don't shoot me.'

Sugar kicked him from the wall to a recess by some steps. 'Tell the cunts you work for,' he said. 'That I want what's fucking mine.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Sugar pointed the gun and this time it cracked like a whip. The boy screamed and held his ankle.

'You shot me you cunt. You fucking shot me.'

Sugar climbed back into the motor. He brought the smell of fireworks with him. He patted Bunty on the shoulder.

'Sure, we better be off.'

Bunty pulled away from the kerb as if he were in no rush to get away. We could have been cruising for a whore, or coming home after a night out. As we moved onto the Easton Road, Sugar's window glided up. In the silence I could hear him breathing. He tucked the gun under the passenger seat, and then turned to look at me. His eyes glowed from his sweaty face like they did when he gave me the beating. He blew air through his lips. 'There's nothing like dusting off the old cobwebs,' he said before flopping back in his seat.

'Bunty?'

'Boss.'

'Put the stereo on, I need to think.'

Country and Western filled the car as we waited for a set of lights. When they went to green Bunty floored the throttle and we sped along the trunk road. Jimmy Mac stares through the window. Streetlights flash past like a strobe in a disco, or the police at the scene of a crime. He thinks about his attack on Sugar. Before he had even got one punch in, something had cracked him on the back of the head. As he dropped, hands had grabbed him. Feet crushed into his neck and his arms were twisted up and secured. Then he was lifted and placed in the back of the car. Now that he's here, a prisoner, he keeps his face as calm. Cable-ties might be cutting into his wrists, but he'd been in situations like this before and managed to work his way out of them. He can head butt and bite and get his arms onto something sharp to cut the ties. Then he'll be free and Sugar's smile will fade as the life is crushed out of him.

They come to a parade of take-away shops. The pavement is crowded with people, some of them spilling onto the road. Bunty peeps the horn as he slows. Jimmy sees a kebab joint ahead, its lights bright in red, white and blue. Two men are fighting. They're gripped together like fucking wrestlers rather than boxers. One tries to hit the other with an umbrella. Then they overbalance and go down, rolling into a puddle, still locked together. Bunty stops and gave the horn another blast.

Sugar opens the window for a better look. Whilst his attention's diverted, Jimmy turns in his seat and places his back to the door. He wriggles his hands until he can feel the latch. It clicks and he pushes until he tumbles out of the car and onto the tarmac. He bangs his head, but keeps turning until he flips himself upright. He ducks between two minicabs and runs as fast as he can. A bullet whizzes past him and cracks through the window of a late-night bakery. A woman screams. The crowd is panicked into a stampede, the stronger ones knocking others into bins as they get out of the way.

Jimmy doesn't stop to help anyone. He jinks and weaves his way along the pavement until he comes to a line of bollards that blocks off a side street. He turns to see Sugar getting into the car. Jimmy keeps running, looking for a telephone box so he can get in touch with Flora. As he disappears into the night, Sugar puts his gun away and winds his window back up.

When we were clear of the people on the road he turned to me.

'Fucking idiots,' he said.

The car twisted its way through the tight streets, until we turned into an avenue. We accelerated alongside the trees, the tyres making a chopping sound as

they vibrated against the water on the road. Tall hotels crowded one side. They faced a long run of high railings, and looked into the expanse and darkness of a park. Sugar pointed through the glass of his window.

‘Do you see that over there?’

I leaned across him until I spotted a huge fucking mansion. It was painted white and spot lights made it glow in the night. It had a balcony on the first floor, and four sets of chimneys. As a light went out in one of the upstairs windows, I felt Sugar’s breath on the back of my neck. The warmth of it was soon followed by a chill that made me want to piss myself. I sat upright and he smiled at me. He leaned his arm along the seat and rested his palm against the back of my neck. I wanted to pull away but I was frozen.

‘Can you imagine the sort of man who’d have lived in such a fucking house as that?’

In my mind, I saw one of the guys who would have fought on the side of the king when they marched into Scotland to defeat the Jacobites.

Sugar was still smiling. I looked into his eyes, but they were that intense I had to turn away. I felt the firmness of his fingers as they pressed against my spine.

‘What do you think he would do if one of his lads lost the amount of money you did tonight?’

‘I suppose he’d hurt them.’

‘He’d break their fucking legs.’

As the words sunk into my head, I heard George’s voice telling me how Sugar had killed boys like me with his bare hands. I realised one of those hands was holding me by the neck.

Sugar raised his voice so that Bunty could hear him. ‘We’ve worked this trade for a while,’ he said. ‘Haven’t we mucker?’

‘Sure, it’s been years.’

Sugar let me go. I swallowed as if he had been choking me. Then I turned to look at him. He was still smiling.

‘And in that time,’ he said. ‘We’ve come across some tricky bastards so we have.’

‘Remember your man Eddie and the stolen motors?’ asked Bunty.

‘Slippery wee bastard,’ said Sugar with a laugh. ‘I ended up putting a bullet in his leg.’

He was silent for a minute. His face glowed as if he was still enjoying the funny side of how he had dealt with Eddie. Then the smile waned and he frowned as he stared into the distance. He spoke slowly, as if he was talking to someone on the end of a phone. 'If I ever find out you're involved in this,' he said. 'You know what'll happen now, don't you?'

I fucking knew all right.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

I woke to the whistling of birds. For a few seconds I thought I was back in Stony Cross and that my mammy was hovering over a pot of porridge and would be shouting me any minute to get up. But then I heard a snore and a whimper and I realised where I was. I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. I followed a crack with my eyes as it ran from the corner of the room to the light fitting. A spider's web ran from the shade to points in the Artex. The shell of a fly hung from one of the strands. It dangled like the heavy bag at the gym. As I gazed at it, I thought about the punches and kicks and the flash of the knife when them fuckers cut the belt from me. I twisted the sheet in my hand and wished I'd been more alert. I might have avoided that road where I was ambushed. Or I could have shouted for Sugar as soon as I knew what was happening. I'd still have taken a battering, but I wouldn't be in as much trouble.

I felt Tommy moving beneath me. I leaned out to see if he was awake. He stared at me but didn't speak. The bruises on his face looked worse than they did last night. I got out of bed and hunkered down beside him. 'I think we should get out of here,' I whispered.

He shook his head. 'If we leave they'll think it was us that stole the fucking money,' he said. 'And I don't want them cunts fucking coming after me.'

One of the others moved in his sleep. I told Tommy to shoosh and stood up to check if the guy was awake. He groaned a couple of times then settled. I turned back to look at Tommy. 'Them darkies are going to want revenge,' I said. 'And who do you think's going to be in the firing line?'

'But if we leave we're fucked.'

'If we stay here we're fucked.'

He didn't say anything.

'I know it's a hard choice,' I said. 'But I'll tell you this. I'm getting the fuck out of here.'

I dragged my bag from under his bed. The dust nearly made me sneeze, but I managed to hold it in. I was packing it with my clothes when he spoke again.

'Hang on.'

'You're not talking me out of it.'

‘I’m not trying to,’ he said. He pointed at the holdall. ‘If you take your stuff they’ll know you’ve ran. If you leave it you might get a better start.’

It made sense so I put everything back and got dressed. I was just tying up my shoes when I heard the guy who was moaning in his sleep. He coughed and asked me what I was up to.

‘I’m going out for a walk.’

He rubbed his eyes. ‘At this time?’

‘I’ll probably get a paper or something.’

‘Could you get me ten Bensons?’

‘Sure.’

He pulled his trousers from his pile of clothes. Coins fell out of his pocket and clattered on the floor. He swore as he tried to gather them. I told him not to worry, that I would get it when I came back.

‘Cheers,’ he said and lay down.

I walked to the door and turned to face Tommy. He was leaning up on one elbow. ‘I’ll see you in a wee while,’ I said.

I wanted to wish him all the best, and tell him to take care and all that other stuff, but I couldn’t in case the other guy heard me. I just looked at him for a few seconds and hoped that he wouldn’t end up with some cunt’s knife hanging out his guts.

I crept into the hallway. I was glad Sugar or Bunty didn’t live with us. The thought of one of them catching me made my throat dry up. I tried not to cough as I passed the room the twins slept in. Their door was closed. I could imagine their faces and shoulders twitching as they dreamt of a gang-war with the Jamaicans. I tiptoed down the stairs, keeping to the edge to avoid any creaks from the wood. When I got to the bottom I pulled my jacket on. I glanced round the room, at the ancient wallpaper and the phone on the table by the banister. The only bit of newness in the whole place was the security gate to the stockroom.

Sunrays streaked through the stained glass of the front door. As I reached for the handle, I heard a noise on the stairs behind me. I turned slowly, expecting one of the twins to ask me what the fuck I was up to. But, it was Tommy.

‘Wait for me,’ he whispered.

He sat on the bottom step.

‘I couldn’t let you travel all that way on your own,’ he said as he pulled on his shoes. When he was done he stood up and patted his jacket. ‘We off then?’

I nodded and he opened the door and stepped out. ‘We better get a move on,’ he said. He walked ahead as if leaving had been his idea in the first place. I followed him down the path, turning for a last look at the house. The sun shone on the tatty window frames and the overgrown garden. The curtains were closed and it was quiet.

Not for long, I thought as I hurried to keep up.



Part Four

# Summer

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Andrew twitched and rolled as he came out of sleep. 'Is that you son?' He reached for the bedside lamp. It made him blink and shade his eyes. 'What are you doing here?'

'I just got in.'

He pushed himself into a sitting position. He frowned as if he was seeing the room for the first time. 'Could you not have spoken to me in the morning?'

'Good to see you too.'

'Don't give me that pish,' he said, his lips flapping round his gums.

He leaned forward and peered at me. 'Come here,' he said. When I was closer he reached for his glasses. The lenses were manky with dust. One of them had a fingerprint on it. 'What the fucking hell happened to you?'

I glanced at the worn carpet. 'I got mugged,' I said, without looking up.

'I knew there was something going on down there,' he said. He threw the covers from his lap and swung his legs off the bed. He reached for his teeth and popped them into his mouth. Then he held his arm up. 'Get my dressing gown.'

I helped him put it on, then walked with him into the living room. The remains of the fire glowed in the grate. 'Better put some coal on that,' he said. 'And no doubt you'll be wanting a cup of tea.'

By the time I'd emptied the scuttle and made the drinks, he was settled in his chair with a smoke in his hand.

'Are you on you own?'

I made a show of looking around. 'As far as I'm aware.'

His teeth clicked together. 'You know what I mean,' he said. 'Is the other boy back as well?'

I tried to hide behind my mug. 'Aye.'

'You're in trouble then?'

'No.'

A sour look passed over his face. He flicked his ash towards the hearth then pointed the fag at me. 'What did these muggers steal off you?'

'Twenty quid.'

'Don't give me that. I didn't come up the Clyde in a banana boat.'

'Nobody said you did.'

'Tell the fucking truth then.'

‘I have.’

He had a long drag. It sent him into a spasm of coughs. He was still spluttering when he seemed to notice that he had a fag between his fingers. He screwed his face up at it, and then tossed it onto the fire. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before turning to me. ‘I know there’s something going on.’

‘There isn’t.’

He leaned forward in his seat. He looked really angry. ‘Don’t fucking lie to me.’

‘I’m not.’

He tugged at his dressing gown until it was wrapped tightly round his chest. He nodded towards the bookcase. ‘Get me the tea caddy.’ I opened it as I walked back. Inside was the envelopes I sent from London, every one of them holding a hundred quid. I dawdled as I stood on the fireside rug. But he flicked his fingers. ‘Come on to fuck, hand it over.’ When he had it on his lap, he tore the letters open and piled the money on the arm of his chair.

‘Where the fuck did this lot come from?’

‘I earned it.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Selling stuff.’

‘A few dusters and that?’

‘Exactly.’

‘You must have been on some fucking commission.’

I tried to look serious. ‘We were.’

‘Don’t make me fucking laugh,’ he said as he shook the notes in the air. ‘If your mammy was alive to see this, she’d keel over with a heart attack.’

I swallowed and looked at the coals. They were starting to smoke as the heat from the embers worked its way into them. I didn’t know what to say.

‘And there was the phone call,’ he said with a sour look. ‘Some thug from Belfast. He told me you’d know him.’

‘What did he have to say?’

‘That you forget something.’

I shrugged. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Beats me pal,’ he said. ‘But it wasn’t your shaving brush, I know that.’

For an instant I saw Sugar and the twins standing over me, Eddie calling me wee shagger as he lifted the thick end of a pool cue and beat me round the hands with it.

‘That was probably my boss,’ I said. ‘He didn’t want me to leave.’

‘Why did you?’

I pointed at my face. ‘Because of this.’

He glared at me as if I was giving him heartburn.

‘I was scared,’ I said. ‘I just wanted to come back to my family.’

‘What were you involved in?’

‘Just selling and that.’

He picked the notes up and beat them against his palm. It reminded me of Sugar that evening in the kitchen. ‘Money like this doesn’t grow on trees,’ he said. ‘You don’t just get it for nothing.’

‘I worked for it.’

He raised his fist. ‘If I was a few years younger,’ he said before he dropped his hand onto his lap. His fingers wriggled into each other as he sighed. His whole body seemed to sag. ‘I don’t want any more lies,’ he said. His voice was so quiet it had to compete with the whining of the fire. Then he pulled himself forward and coughed.

‘Have they got you involved in some sort of armed struggle?’

He was so off the mark I couldn’t help but laugh. ‘No.’

‘Because it wouldn’t surprise me,’ he said. ‘That Tommy hasn’t the brains he was born with. If someone offered him a bag of sweets, he’d walk into anything.’

His forehead creased and he gazed at me for a couple of seconds.

I frowned at him. ‘What?’

He sat up straight. ‘I think that’s it,’ he said. ‘I can see it in your eyes.’ He leaned over and picked up the phone.

‘I better get Suzanne,’ he said.

‘You can’t,’ I said. ‘She’ll call the police.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ he said. ‘You’re going to need protection. We both are. We might have to ask for Special Branch.’

‘It wasn’t terrorism.’

His lips tightened. His finger still hovered over the dial.

‘I swear on it,’ I said, louder than I meant to.

He put the phone down and looked at me. His expression said ‘And?’

‘It was drugs.’

‘What sort?’

I tugged at one of my eyebrows. I couldn’t look at him. ‘Heroin.’

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’

I stared into the fire. The smoke rushing out of the coal flashed as it took light.

He sighed again. ‘And you’re in trouble because of that?’

‘Aye.’

‘With the police?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I was holding the money and I got robbed.’

‘How much?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘A couple of grand maybe.’

‘Jesus fucking Christ.’

‘It wasn’t my fault.’

‘And what did they say?’

‘That I’d have to work it off.’

‘So you came home?’

I had to blink back tears. Before long they flooded down my cheeks. My nose filled with snot. Words came out of me in shuddery squeaks. ‘I saw them shoot this darkie,’ I said. ‘I was feared.’

The crying stopped as suddenly as it started. I sniffed and rubbed my eyes with my knuckles. He handed me a paper hanky. I blew my nose and threw it onto the fire. Then I turned to look at him. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘You’re home now,’ he said. ‘That’s the main thing.’ He held his chest and wheezed for a bit. ‘Get me my inhaler.’ I searched for it amongst the old magazines by the side of the fire. He had a couple of squirts before resting into the cushions. His old lips had a touch of blue in them. He pursed them and breathed softly for a while.

‘I’ll give Billy a ring,’ he said as he gazed at the fire. ‘He’ll help to sort it out.’

‘I don’t want him knowing.’

‘Why not?’

‘He’s a fucking hypocrite.’

Andrew banged the arm of the chair with his fist. ‘You stupid wee fucker,’ he said. ‘You’ve got yourself into deep trouble, this isn’t the time for your pride getting in the way.’

‘But.’

‘But fucking nothing, I’m phoning Billy first thing tomorrow. That’s final.’

He lit up a fag. He had a couple of gentle tugs on it. His chest whined like a broken accordion. His eyes softened when he looked at me.

‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ he said before turning to stare at the flames.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

I raced towards the hillside. Billy grunted like one of them women tennis players when I caught up with him. It was easy to get past him. He was too heavy to be any competition on a serious run. I put my head down and kept going, my trainers slapping against the tarmac. When I reached the shale, I slowed to a jog. I lifted my fists and sparred with the morning air. I wriggled my head and neck as I hit the slope. I felt like I was battling a tough opponent, one of them tough cunts with hard muscles and a flat nose. I tucked my chin into my chest, then jiggled left and right as I climbed. I lifted my knees high, getting the maximum effort into the work. My lungs started to chuff like a steam engine. I kept going until my chest was burning with the power of Jimmy Mac.

When he gets to the top of the bing, he stops and gasps in some air. His legs wobble like jelly. As he recovers his breath, he surveys the valley below. No one is there. Nobody has seen him. He turns and makes his way into the bushes. Flora is sheltering under a tarpaulin sheet that stretches between tree trunks and a heap of broken concrete. She tends a small fire. On it rests a kettle. A rabbit's cooking on a spit. She looks up at him. Her green eyes glow through her soot-blackened face. She pulls the carcass from the fire and rips it in half. Jimmy's so hungry he moans as he tastes the lovely meat.

Did you get the car? she asks.

Aye, he says. I've hidden it.

Are they going to help us?

They will if they think I can return the favour.

And how will you do that?

He doesn't answer. She frowns as I walked past her and continued into the trees. It was dark under there. A tit squeaked in the branches. The poor cunt was nervous from the sound of trainers crackling through twigs. I heard a crashing through the undergrowth behind me. It was Billy, his face red and swollen. As soon as he caught up with me he started on about London. His chest was heaving as he breathed. 'I blame my fucking self for letting Tommy get involved with the twins,' he said. 'I knew they were trouble. I fucking knew it. But Hannah told me they had changed. And I believed her. Fool that I am.'

He turned and walked along the path. 'I even had a word with Eddie to make sure everything was above board. He said that since the ceasefire, he was finished with the drugs. That he was away from Belfast and working in England. The fucker told me it was strictly legit, that he was paying taxes and everything.'

He wiped his forehead when we sat on the dyke that curved round the old water tower. As he got his breath back, I gazed at the concrete structure. It was covered in mossy armour, and its supports were choked with brambles. It could have been King William of Orange, mounted on a white charger, struggling with a tangle of serpents.

'Andrew told me about the cash you sent home,' said Billy. I turned to look at him. His face screwed up as if he had just noticed the smell of shit on the field. 'That money's rotten,' he said. 'Cursed.'

'The shops still take it.'

He sighed. 'You're better off without it,' he said.

He picked at the wall with his thumbnail. 'This is what we'll do.' He stood up and smiled. 'We'll get a contribution from Tommy to fatten up the offering. I'll send it to Sugar with a message from me.' His chin came out and his face hardened. 'That'll draw a line under things.'

'What if it doesn't?'

'Then we'll rethink the situation.'

He came back to the wall and sat down. His voice quietened as if he was letting me in on a secret. 'Men like Sugar prey on the vulnerable,' he said. 'Once he knows that he can only get to you through me, he'll back off.'

I flinched when he went to pat me on the knee. His hand paused in mid air, then dropped onto the stone between us. I watched the fingers curve round the edge and squeeze. 'Let me deal with it,' he said. 'You've got plenty of other things to be worrying about.'

'Like what?'

'School.'

'Oh.'

'Never mind that attitude,' he said as if he was my fucking father. As if the cunt had sat up with me when I was a wean crying in the night, telling me stories and rocking me to sleep.

'What would your mammy want for you?'



I didn't say anything.

'School,' he repeated as he climbed off the wall. He looked at his watch.

'Come on, we better move if I'm going to get to work.'

The path twisted round the woods and down the north side of the hill. There was a queer fucking wind. It was freezing. It dried my eyes out and at the same time made them fill with tears. The slope made me go faster than I intended. Billy stopped and turned and I bumped into him. I was that shocked by it I jumped back and slipped on the grass. He grabbed me by the shoulder to steady me.

'Sorry,' I said.

'That's all right son.'

'Don't call me that.'

I twisted my body as I stepped past and ducked under a branch. I started to jog as the trail curved downwards, past blossoming hawthorn, a barbed wire fence, and a rusted bit of machinery. Eventually I came to the farm gate next to the old place. As I leaned on the spars and waited for him, I could see how the house had already changed. It was surrounded by scaffolding. The stonework had been extended to take in the outbuildings. Two men worked on the skeleton of a new roof. Another man sliced a spade into the edge of a ditch. A cement mixer churned next to a maze of foundations. Window frames were propped on the beginnings of the walls.

Some cunt was going to make a fortune out of this.

I turned just as Billy appeared. I swung open the gate and started down the brae. As we walked past the house, I pointed at it. 'The will should be sorted out soon,' I said. 'I could use my share to pay Sugar for what I lost.'

He shook his head. 'Andrew told me your inheritance is going into a trust,' he said. 'To access it, you would need Suzanne's permission.'

'Fuck sake.'

'And anyway,' he said. 'I thought I was going to sort it out?'

When we got close to the main road and the entrance to the yard, a diesel engine roared like a fucking animal. The sound cut through the air, sending the rooks cawing from the trees.

Billy raised his voice. 'That cunt is too much for a young lad like you,' he said. 'He'd take every penny your mammy left you, and when it was gone, he'd fucking kill you anyway, and dump you in a hole somewhere.'

I looked away from him and across the road. A man unlatched the gates and swung them open. In the middle of the yard, a bright red digger sat on a raised platform. Its arm was curved into its tracks. A snort of smoke blew skywards as the engine screamed. The claw stretched and forced its way into the ground. It tore out a huge clump and dropped it onto the back of a lorry.

Billy put his hand on my shoulder. It felt heavy. 'Is that where you want to end up?'

I kicked at a stone on the ground. 'No.'

'Well do yourself a favour,' he said. 'Stop thinking about Sugar and get your arse back to school.'

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Fiona sat across the rug from me, her back against the bed. Her feet twisted round each other, making the material of her tights dig into her knee. She frowned as she stroked me on the cheekbone. I'd made up some story about men jumping me for my bag of household items.

'I'm glad you're back,' she said. 'I was really worried about you down there.'

She frowned again. 'Poor Jamie,' she said. 'You must have been really upset. Especially with all that stuff with Billy and Suzanne.'

'Billy's acting like he's my fucking dad,' I said. 'He told me to get my arse back to school.'

'That's what you should do,' she said. 'The exams are next month.'

'I know,' I said. 'Suzanne keeps reminding me.'

'You'll be all right though,' she said. 'You just need to do some revising.'

I flicked through her tapes. 'I don't know if I'll be able to catch up,' I said. I pulled out one by Portishead and looked at her. 'Is this any good?'

'Aye,' she said. 'But put it back.' She stood up. 'Do you want me to help you?'

'With what?'

She opened the wardrobe and pulled out her bag. 'Revision, you idiot,' she said as she sat on the bed. She patted the duvet cover. 'Come up here.'

When I was next to her she started to flick through her jotters. She told me that Hitler had moved from the Jacobite rebellion and was now telling them about the immigrants to Central Scotland.

'Like the Irish and that?' I asked. 'Catholics?'

'Aye,' she said. 'But not just them.' She counted off her fingers as she told me about the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, the Highlanders who came down during the Clearances, the Jews that were escaping the Russians, and the Lithuanian miners.

'So I might have Viking blood in me?'

'But it won't be pure.'

'Dirty Viking blood?'

She tucked her hair behind her ear and tilted her chin as she looked at me.

'Dirty something,' she said.

'Only for you,' I said.

‘Aye right.’

Even though I could feel my cheeks burning, I reached for her hand and squeezed it. ‘Honest to God,’ I said. ‘I’ve only ever been with you.’

She pulled away and patted the edges of jotters until they were in a neat heap. The top one had a yellow cover. A love heart was drawn on it with our initials. I stared at it and felt a lump come into my throat.

‘Anyway,’ she said. ‘Shall we have a look at Geography?’

I nodded and mumbled as she told me about how the Himalayas were formed. She started by explaining how the crust of the earth is covered in fractures, and that bits of it float around like pack ice on the sea. She put her palm on the bed to show me, sliding it around and telling me the bits were called Tectonic Plates. She pushed her hand against mine until she bent her fingers and they curved upwards like a range of mountains. I looked at her eyes. She smiled.

‘Do you get it?’ she said as she leaned towards me. Our lips touched. The heat of it was like a fucking lightning bolt or something. And yet it was that gentle. I wanted to raise my hand and touch her. But I was scared of breaking the spell. After a few seconds, she twisted away from me. I could hear the pure fucking passion in her breath. She tightened her mouth, and said we should get on with some work.

‘English,’ she said and opened a notepad and flattened it on the bed. She blinked as she drew her finger through the words on the page. I really tried to concentrate on what she was talking about, but I couldn’t.

She frowned when she next glanced at me. ‘You’re not listening,’ she said.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I can’t stop thinking about us.’

She lifted the pile of jotters into her bag. As she tucked it back into the wardrobe she turned her eyes to look at me. ‘I still like you Jamie, but we need to take it slow.’ She came back to the bed and held my hand. ‘Do you understand?’

My eyes were that full, I didn’t dare say anything. I just nodded and looked into her eyes. It was like staring into the sea.

## Chapter Thirty

Jimmy Mac steps into the room. Two policemen are sitting behind a table, their hands folded in front of them. One has a notepad. The other has silver braid sewn into his shoulder boards. He's obviously the boss.

Jimmy salutes them. The one with the pad speaks first.

Why are you here?

I need your help.

To do what?

Solve a problem we have in common.

The boss frowns as he looked at Jimmy.

What might that be?

Jimmy's about to answer when Hitler tapped me on the arm. 'Are you listening?'

I looked at the Rector. 'Yes sir,' I said. 'Of course I am.'

Hitler told me he was deeply concerned about how long I'd been off school. Not to mention my family situation. 'The less said about that the better,' he said as he flicked through the file. He told me if I was to have any chance of doing well next year I needed to have a solid foundation. 'Highers are far tougher than O-Grades you know,' he said.

'Yes sir,' I said. I tried not to slouch and spread my legs like the twins. 'My uncle says I need to stay in every night to do my homework.'

'That's a start,' he said.

'And all my teachers are giving me extra assignments.'

The Rector nodded as if I should be eating bread and water. 'That's settled then,' he said as he glanced at his watch and stood up. 'Plenty of hard work and you are in with a good chance of getting the grades expected of you. You're a bright young man and it would be a shame of you weren't to develop your potential to the full.'

The police boss escorts Jimmy from the interview, and along a darkened corridor. He opens a door into a brightly lit room. Jimmy blinks as his eyes adjust. The boss opens a steel cupboard.

We might be able to help you, he says as he draws out a pistol. It's a nine millimetre. The same kind as Sugar's.

He passes Jimmy the gun. But first you need to prove yourself, he says.

Jimmy slides the catch back and checks to see if it's loaded. He glances at the targets hanging at the far side of the room.

Better get some practise in, says the boss.

A cloud passed over the sun as I walked from the playground to the gates. I was nearly there when I noticed a group of boys standing next to the pillars. Puffs of smoke wafted from them. My heart gave a wee turn when I saw it was Plunk and his pals. He had the same fucking expression as he had that time in the chippy. He turned and smiled as he spoke to the others.

I glared at him as I strode along the tarmac. He didn't look away, but I could see the cunt wasn't as sure of himself. I imagined a bit of fear building in him as he took in the bruises around my face. I sucked air into my chest and felt it build me up, make me bigger. I readied myself to attack him by planning the punches I would land on him, wiggling my head from side to side and rolling my shoulders.

When I was next to him I dropped my bag on the floor and lifted my chin as I stared into his eyes.

'Do you want a fucking picture?'

He frowned so I pushed my face forward. 'Eh?'

He blinked and looked away.

'You fucking wee prick,' I said.

I turned to his pals and they backed away. I barged through the gates. My heart thumped as I walked down the street, excited as Jimmy Mac firing a pistol into a row of paper targets.

After the shooting, the policeman nods as he arranges some targets on the desk. All have been torn around the bull's-eye. Impressive, he says. He pulls a bottle of whisky out of the drawer and offers Jimmy a large glass.

I think we'll be able to do something, he says.

When the whistle blew we ran at an easy pace, loosening our thigh muscles, sparring with the air. We were to imagine sitting on the stool in corner with a stinky towel round their shoulders. As we jogged Tiger shouted instructions about washing out our mouths and having our faces wiped. Then he put his whistle to his lips and we were off again for another sprint. He shouted us into putting hands into action for jabs and crosses, and protecting our ribs with our elbows.

After five rounds we bunched round the kitbag he'd placed at the side of the field. He lifted it and shook out a load of ropes onto the grass. 'Come on you stupid bastards,' he said as we got caught up untangling the lines. He stood us in a row at the edge of the field. He showed us the rhythms he wanted. We started, one at a time, until we were a noise of whipping ropes.

Boys were playing football in the field in front of us. It was reds against blues, the ball thumping in a loud echo every time it was kicked. Four lassies stood behind the goalmouth. When the skipping was at its peak, they started whistling, and for a moment the rhythm broke.

'Never mind them,' said Tiger. 'Get on with it. You'll have time enough for that on Saturday night.'

He blew his whistle again, and jogged us into the gym. He grabbed us two at a time and put us to work. Me and another guy were sent to the heavy bag. I tugged on a pair of gloves and launched into it, thinking of the cunts that mugged me. After a few blows, they were pure fucking sagging under the weight of my punches, bending over and waiting for the big one on the head. I knocked them out then imagined the twins, both of the cunts at the same time. The blood pumped round my body as I worked, my punches wild and hard. Their eyes lightened with fear as I got into the fuckers. I lashed them until they backed away shiteing it.

Last of all I faced up to Sugar.

The man himself, I said as I kissed my gloves.

A few jabs to the head then a cross into his chin. I followed with plenty of body shots, working hard into the kidneys, so that I would send him back to the Shankill with a trace of blood in his piss. I dug my head into the side of the bag and banged like fuck for the whole of a three-minute round. By the end of it I was grunting like one of them women tennis players, or some sort of animal who had no idea when to fucking stop.

The whistle went and still I punched, until Tiger pulled me off, saying, 'Easy son, easy.' He held my arm up and said I went like a champ, and that was the sort of stamina they were looking for in the ring. He told me that being able to step up a gear so you can have force in the punches right up to the bell, might be the difference between winning and losing a hard bout. Some fighters anticipate the end of a round and subconsciously let their guard down. That's the time to mash into them. They

might not get knocked out, but they take such a fucking battering they go into the next round weak at the knees. A good boxer can take advantage of that.

‘So well done,’ he said.

I grabbed the bag while the other guy piled into it. I felt the weight of the punches, absorbed into the leather and pushed against my torso. I used the rhythm to practise my defence moves, holding it with my elbows down and at the side, and moving with the fighter like I was taking the blows myself, catching them on my arms so they didn’t get me in the fucking kidneys.

I passed under a streetlight as I strode towards Andrew’s, watching my shadow stretch as if it was some other cunt’s, or maybe even a stalker following me. When I was in the darkness between the lampposts, I started to think about the twins. This time I wasn’t punching them until they went down. They were much fucking stronger. As I pictured the battle, I glanced round the fences and hedges. I saw a movement in a garden. Eddie’s voice echoed round my head.

Wee Shagger.

I tried not to think of the cunts. I filled out my chest and marched into the darkness as if I was Jimmy Mac. He wouldn’t be walking along like a scared wee rabbit. He wouldn’t flinch every time he saw a cat, or any other shadow you get in the night. Even if he was on the run from the paramilitaries. I walked towards a Transit that was half parked on the pavement. Anybody could be hiding behind it, ready to jump out and attack. All four of them could be standing there, hushing each other. When I passed they would jump out in a fucking whirlwind and beat me half to death. I moved onto the road so I wouldn’t be caught between the van and the fence. My heart pumped as I passed, my head turning and my eyes everywhere. I breathed easier when I saw there was no one there. By the time I stepped back onto the pavement, the whole of my body was twitching with adrenalin. I shrunk into my hoodie and scanned the street. I couldn’t wait to get in and close the door. I’d lock the cunt, have a cup of tea with my uncle, and then I’d get into bed. I’d tuck the covers up to my chin, and rest my head against the pillow, safe.

But before I could get home, I had to walk past the garages. A streetlight was bolted to the brick arch that hung over the opening. It flickered and buzzed, showing the tangle of barbed wire that stopped cunts climbing on it. As I got closer I pictured the twins standing beneath the orange light, their legs spread like the Gallagher’s. A



shiver ran up my spine and into the back of my neck. I rubbed it and heard the echo of Eddie's voice.

Wee Shagger.

I pulled the hood from my head and looked behind. There was no-one there. I turned and walked on. When I heard the voice once more, it took a couple of seconds for me to figure out it wasn't my fucking imagination. One of the twins was really behind me, calling.

'Wee Shagger.'

The shock of it made my knees wobble. My foot caught on a crack in a paving slab. I almost tripped. I put my hand to my chest and turned round. The pair of the cunts was crossing the road towards me. Eddie smiled as if he was pleased to see me. 'We need to have a wee chat, so we do.'

George pulled a packet of fags out and lit one. He pointed his thumb at the garages. 'In private.'

I looked into the darkness beyond the arch. 'I need to get home,' I said. 'My uncle's waiting for me.'

Eddie nodded up the hill. 'Fair enough,' he said. His eyes widened. 'We'll do it at his.'

My stomach lurched as I shook my head.

'Right then,' said George as he crossed the road.

Eddie put his arm up. 'After you.'

George led us between the concrete shells. The walls were covered in spray paint. He stopped beside a door that was half open. The lock was busted, the rear of a car just visible in the edge of the streetlight. He had another puff on his cigarette and flicked the end into the air. It tumbled onto the ground and glowed for a few seconds before dimming and going out.

'You owe us money.'

'I sent you all I had.'

Eddie turned and walked away from me. He stepped round in a circle before facing me again. 'You can't hand over a few quid and think that's it finished.'

'But I haven't got anymore.'

'Phone that sister of yours,' said George. He smiled out of the side of his mouth. 'The one that turned out to be your mammy.'

'And tell her what?'

‘You’ll have to make something up.’

‘Like what?’ I asked with a shrug. ‘I need it to buy a motor. She’ll not go for that.’

‘Well tell her the truth,’ said George. ‘Your life’s in danger.’

‘She’ll get the police,’ I said. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘Any sign of them,’ said Eddie. ‘And you’re fucking shot.’

‘You stupid cunt,’ said George. He clenched his fist in front of my face. It was close enough that I could see his knuckles whiten.

I readied myself in case he was going to start punching me. I was that focused on it, I barely saw Eddie swing his shoulder. I tried to turn, but was too late and he got me right on the fucking chin. Next thing I knew I was on the floor, my palms pressing against the grit of the concrete. I tried to push myself up, but the cunts kicked me until I rolled onto my back.

Eddie dropped his knee into my chest. The pain was that fucking much it made me scream.

‘What about the money your mammy left you?’ he asked.

‘I can’t get my hands on it,’ I said. ‘They think I’m too young.’

‘What about that daddy of yours?’

‘He’s been dead for years.’

‘You know who he means,’ said George. ‘The Good Protestant Soldier,’

‘That cunt must owe you some fucking maintenance,’ said Eddie.

‘I’ll have a word with him,’ I said. ‘How much do you want?’

‘Two fucking grand,’ said Eddie.

‘He’ll not give me that much.’

‘It should be more, so it should,’ said George. ‘But Sugar’s cutting you a good fucking deal.’

‘You better show how grateful you are,’ said Eddie as he leaned on his knee. He squeezed that hard I could hardly breathe.

‘We’ll be here until tomorrow,’ said George.

‘Don’t make us go back empty handed.’

‘That would be a fucking mistake.’

‘You’ve made enough of them already.’

## Chapter Thirty-One

I glanced at the poster of Kurt before sitting down and sinking my head into my hands. I thought about putting a gun in my mouth and pulling the trigger. Blood and brains would spray all over the sheets and carpet. Bone would get wedged into the wallpaper and a flap of skin with hair still attached might even get stuck on the ceiling. I would slump to the floor, maybe twitching for a second or two before my soul shook itself free of my body. It would rise and swirl like the last bit of smoke from a fag end, then drift out of the door and into the atmosphere. I'd be free of the twins and Sugar and could float through the skies until I found my mammy.

Then I thought about Andrew finding my body. Not shot in the head, because I didn't have a gun. I'd have to hang myself. He'd come into my room and I'd be dangling from the ceiling. What have you done? he'd ask as he grabbed at me, trying to lift me as he hacked into the rope with a bread knife. His old breath wasn't able to cope with it, so he had to have a few blasts on the inhaler before he phoned the police.

I could use my school tie. That would make it seem even more fucking tragic. The boy was being pursued by paramilitaries, it would say in the paper. A picture of Sugar above the words, his face evil and shifty like that cunt Fred West. Then the court case. They'd send a photograph of me round the jury, my face purple and my tongue blue.

I tapped the wall with my hand and tried to work out what Jimmy Mac would do. He wouldn't even think of committing suicide. He do something about his situation. He'd fucking shoot the cunts. Then he'd chore some money from somewhere and him and Flora would disappear for good. Maybe back to England, or even further afield like Europe.

After a while, I stood up, turned the light off and went to the window. I noticed that one of the motors parked on the road was different from the rest. It was black. It looked a bit like the Lexus. I wondered if I should go out and check if there was anyone inside. I gulped as I thought of Sugar sitting in the driving seat. I could see him smoking a fag, having a long drag and pointing the ashy tip towards the front of the car.

Stony Cross, he said. What a fucking dump.

He turned and creased his forehead and focused on Eddie.

So it better be fucking worth it, he said.

It will be, said Eddie.

He's got an inheritance now, said George.

At least ten grand, said Eddie.

Is that right? said Sugar. He had another drag on his fag then spoke out of the side of his mouth.

All that a man has, he said. He'll give for his fucking life.

That's what I like to hear, said Eddie.

A good hard kicking, said George.

Another car appeared on the street. It parked on the pavement outside the house. Sugar saw it as well.

Peelers, he said. He dropped his window a couple of inches and flicked the butt into the rain.

Billy got out of the new car. So did a big police. They bent their heads forward and moved towards the path. I dropped the curtain. My breath quivered as it shot in and out of my chest. Although I was expecting the bang on the door, I still jumped when it happened. It was as loud as a fucking gunshot. The shock of it made me think of Kurt again, the back of his head open, blood coming out of his nostrils and his mouth. I took a slow lungful of air and sneaked along the hall until I could see their shadows through the glass.

The fresh smell of rain hit me when I opened the door. Billy crowded the step, his shoulders wide with a suit jacket. His lips were tight, like he was a fucking doctor about to tell some cunt they had cancer. 'All right son?' he asked. The police had three stripes on his arm. It was MacIvor. He nodded but didn't say anything as he pushed his way in. I followed them into the living room. Andrew was out of his chair tucking his vest into his trousers. His book was on the side table with his glasses resting on top of it. He shook hands with the sergeant. They said their how you doings and then he sat down, hunched on the edge of his cushion. He looked shabby and wrinkled next to the other two.

MacIvor leaned against the window frame and unbuttoned his jacket. 'Sounds like you've bitten off more than you can chew,' he said to me.

Billy settled into the chair opposite Andrew's. He frowned and played with the cuff of his shirt. 'You can say that again.' He put his hands behind his neck then nodded like he was letting me into a secret. 'The twins need somebody's foot up their

arse,' he said. 'They've been out of control since their daddy was killed. I knew it was a mistake letting Tommy go down there.'

Andrew turned to MacIvor. 'Is this you involved officially like?'

'No,' I said. 'Sugar will kill me.'

'Don't be silly,' said Andrew. He rolled his eyes as if I was being over-dramatic.

MacIvor stood away from the wall. He towered over me, his forehead creased as if he was concentrating on the pages of a book. 'Were you actually handling the drugs?'

I tucked my chin into my chest like I would in a fight. 'Aye.'

'That's intent to supply,' said MacIvor. He nodded to Andrew. 'And conspiracy.'

'Is that bad?' asked Andrew.

'He'd definitely go to the jail,' said MacIvor.

'Stupid wee bastard,' said Billy. 'Christ knows what your mammy must be thinking.'

I looked at Billy and his suit and tie and his churchgoing attitude. 'Who are you talking about?' I asked. 'Esther or Suzanne?'

'No need to be cheeky,' said Andrew. He held his palms out to Billy. 'Sorry about that.'

I rounded on Andrew. 'What are you apologising to that cunt for?'

'He's trying to help you.'

'It doesn't sound like it to me.'

'Well I am,' said Billy. He pulled at the lapels of his jacket. 'When all's said and done, you're one of mine.'

'You wouldn't think so,' I said. 'All the times you saw me and never once did you give me a fucking hint.'

'I'm sorry son.'

'I asked you not to call me that,' I said. 'You're not my fucking dad.'

'Jamie,' said Andrew.

'Playing happy families to everybody but me,' I said. 'When Suzanne needed the support.'

'It was her that wanted nothing to do with him,' said Andrew.

‘But what about me?’ I asked before swinging round to face Billy. ‘You fucking hypocrite.’

‘Jamie son,’ said Andrew.

‘The boy’s right,’ said Billy as he loosened the knot of his tie. ‘But at least I’m man enough to admit where I went wrong.’

Andrew nodded. ‘Billy’s talking sense,’ he said to me. ‘For fuck sake, let him help you.’

I sat on the arm of his chair. ‘OK,’ I said. ‘How are you going to do that?’

‘For a start you could tell us what they want,’ said Billy.

‘They reckon I still owe them two grand.’

‘Dirty bastards,’ said Andrew as he shook his head and gazed at the fire. ‘All their talk about Catholics is just a smokescreen for their greed.’

Billy ignored him. He turned to the sergeant. ‘What do you think?’

MacIvor hunkered down in front of the fire. He held his hands to the heat then rubbed them together. He grimaced as he looked at Billy.

‘You’ve got a couple of choices,’ he said. ‘For one, you could give them the money and hope that’s the end of it.’

‘You can’t give in to extortion,’ said Andrew.

‘Shut up,’ I said. I nodded to MacIvor.

‘They’ll take it,’ he said. ‘But in my experience, men like that don’t stop until they’re stopped.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to say,’ said Andrew.

‘So how can we draw a line under this?’ asked Billy. ‘Without putting the boy into danger.’

‘We could hand it over to the authorities,’ said Andrew.

‘That’s not an option,’ said Billy. ‘He’d spend the rest of his days looking over his shoulder.’

‘No to mention the jail he’d face himself,’ said MacIvor. ‘That can ruin a boy his age.’

‘He should have thought of that beforehand,’ said Andrew.

‘There’s no point in spending the night recriminating,’ said Billy. ‘We need to move forward.’

MacIvor nodded at Billy then turned to Andrew. ‘When you go through the system,’ he said. ‘Your main strength is in the quality of your witnesses. The defence

would tar the boy as a drug dealer, so they could always say that his testimony was bought for the price of a lesser sentence. They'd make him look like a wee chiseller and his credibility would be destroyed.'

'Oh.'

'And,' said MacIvor. 'With the boy marked as a grass, they could seriously hurt him, even kill him, and no one in Belfast or anywhere else would lift a finger. Their community would see it as a job well done.'

'So what are we going to do then?' asked Billy.

'You could meet force with force,' said MacIvor. 'Talk to the man Sugar. Tell him the boy is your son, and that he's under your protection.'

'I already fucking done that.'

'Well you need to show him how serious you are,' said MacIvor. 'Make sure the cunt knows you're supported by a few pals in the Lodge.' He nodded. 'Not to mention the police.'

'How's that different from sending it through the courts?' asked Andrew.

'The back-up will be unofficial,' said MacIvor. He smiled round the room and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'My gang's bigger than his. He knows that if we really want to, we can fuck him up.'

Billy nodded. He held up his fist. 'I'll make sure he realises he's got a fight on his hands.'

'But at the same time,' said MacIvor. 'Give him the money to sweeten the deal. That will most probably be the end of it.'

He stood up and brushed his hands together. Then he frowned at me. 'And in future,' he said as he tapped the side of his head. 'Try and think about what you're getting involved in.'

'Here, here,' said Andrew.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

I got up early and put on my tracksuit. I went into the garden and did some star jumps and a few squat thrusts. I started an easy jog to loosen myself up, stepping on and off the pavement, punching and twisting, getting my body used to the exertions. When I reached the bottom of the hill, I surged forward with my fists pumping the air, curving my back to channel all of my power into the sprint. My feet hit the ground like pistol shots. After a hundred yards my calves started to cramp, but I kept up the pace until the pain seared into me like bullets.

Jimmy Mac shoots half a dozen paper targets, filling the range with smoke. He removes the ear defenders and hangs them on their hook.

Impressive, says the police boss.

I stopped next to a telephone post. Air cut into my lungs like burning gunpowder. I put my fist to my mouth and coughed. I tried to breathe as Tiger had taught me, in through my nose and out of my mouth. Counting down the seconds as if I was sitting on a stool in the corner of the ring, waiting to step back out and face my opponent. When the bell rang, I followed the track round the side of the Lodge. Cool air thumped into my chest as I ran beside the strands of barbed wire that looped into the fence.

Jimmy is escorted out of police headquarters by the boss. Coils of razor wire topped the high walls. They climb into an unmarked car that's parked beside a pile of milk crates. A man in a dark uniform waves them through a barrier and into the street. Fog curls between buildings, exposing darkened sandstone in shifts of the wind. After a few minutes, a structure becomes solid amongst the shadows. It has grey granite columns and a relief of galloping cavalry. The boss stops by the iron railings.

Good luck.

Jimmy pats his side and the pistol that's tucked into his waist. Hopefully I won't need it, he says.

The man passes him an envelope. Jimmy slides it into his breast pocket then jinks onto the road, between a bus and a taxi. When he's on the other side he turns to look, but the man has already gone. Jimmy grabs the handle of the car and opens it.

All right then? asks Flora.

Jimmy slumps into the passenger seat. Lets get out of here.



Mist surrounded the canal like a quilt. Water gushed from the leat in mixture of foam and plastic bags. I continued along the towpath until I came to the embankment. I kept the speed up as I climbed, my legs burning and my lungs screaming. When I got onto the road I stopped to get my breath. I leaned on a wall and stared at the pavement, my legs aching as oxygen found its way back into them. I counted down the seconds, getting myself ready for another round. I was just about to rise and face my opponent, when a car swerved to a stop by the kerb. The doors flew open and the twins were on me. They grabbed my arms and shoulders and pushed me into the back.

Except for the sound of the engine, there was silence in the Lexus. The shoulders of the twins bumped against me when we went round a corner. I focused on the space between the front seats. Sugar's hand came into view as he rested it on his knee. A fag was in his fingers, its smoke curling up and crashing against the windscreen. He put it to his mouth, and his breath hissed as he inhaled. Then he opened the ashtray and crushed it out.

'So whose idea was it to involve the fucking peelers?' he asked.

I glanced at the smudge marks my trainers had made on the back of Bunty's seat. 'What are you talking about?'

Eddie did a yodelling expression. Then he laughed. 'Listen to him.'

'He's fucking shiteing it,' said George.

We passed the phone box, then the archway of the cemetery and the curving drive. From the corner of my eye I saw rows of headstones flash past, with the war memorial proud in the middle of it all.

'Pull in here,' said Sugar.

Bunty slowed the motor. 'Where?'

Sugar pointed to the lane that split the graveyard from the canal. His hand jerked to emphasise his words. 'In there, you stupid cunt.'

The car bumped from the main road. As we squeezed between the bushes that overhung the tracks, Sugar pushed himself high in his seat and glanced all around. Eventually he held his hand up. He twisted his head round to look at me. 'This is it then.' He unclicked his seat belt and pushed his door open. He grunted as he heaved himself outside. He had another glance up and down the lane before standing facing the wall. His legs twitched as he had a slash. After shaking himself and pulling up his

zip, he went to the back of the car and rummaged in the boot. I heard the lid being slammed before he appeared at the window.

‘Out.’

As I climbed from the motor, I got a smell of his pish. Some of it was dripping from the leaf of a nettle. George and Eddie pushed me against the wall, crushing my face into the grit. Birds whistled in the trees and a bee moved from one flower to the next. Sugar told Eddie to go back towards the road and keep watch. ‘Sure, we don’t want any witnesses.’

George turned me round. Sugar had a pistol. He pushed the fucking thing against my face.

‘So whose idea was it to get the peelers?’

‘Nobody called them.’

‘Shall I take it out on that uncle of yours?’ he asked. He put his hand round my neck. ‘Is that what you want?’

I tried to shake my head. He ground the barrel into my skin. It connected with a nerve that shot a line of pain right through my fucking gums.

The hand tightened on my neck. His eyes pierced into me. ‘Tell me the fucking truth.’

Eddie whistled and walked quickly up the lane. He whispered loudly as he got close to us. ‘Some woman’s walking a dog.’

Sugar stepped away from me. He tucked the gun into his waistband and nodded at the car. ‘Put him in the boot.’

Eddie and George grabbed my arms and steered me round the back of the motor. Eddie’s fingers slackened as he bent to the lock. George put his hand on my head and started to push me into a crouch. Just as he was starting to launch me inside, I twisted and jerked myself out of Eddie’s grip. I stood upright and gave George an uppercut right on the fucking jaw.

‘Get the fucker,’ said Sugar.

I bolted up the lane, glancing left and right for a way to escape. I headed for a gap in the hawthorn and crashed through some nettles. They hit my hands but I didn’t even notice if they stung. The ground sloped upwards and my toes ploughed into the dirt as I climbed. Bushes thickened until I had to struggle through them. I heard one of the twins shout when I came to the bank of the canal. I squelched into reeds. Coldness came to my knees, but I dragged myself forward by the clumps until I could

get a footing on something solid. The path meandered by the side of the water, until it curved under some ivy. I had a look behind. The twins were hesitating by the reeds, until Sugar appeared close behind them. Then they were in and struggling to cross.

I dashed into the graveyard, through the markers for the dead weans. One of them said, Peace at Last My Troubled Boy. The words echoed in my mind as I cut through the rose garden and round by the war memorial. A hedge blocked my way, so I leapt over it and sprinted for the main entrance. I kept going, underneath the arch and onto the street. My legs started to cramp as I raced up the hill to the phone box. I was breathless by the time I reached it. I had no money on me, so had to dial the operator. It took ages before a woman answered.

‘I need to speak to William McKinley,’ I said to her. ‘Reverse charges.’

‘What’s the number?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘He lives in Stony Cross. You’ll have to look it up.’ As I spoke I glanced up and down the road. There was still no sign of the twins or Sugar.

After a few seconds the woman said, ‘Who shall I say is calling?’

‘Jamie,’ I said. ‘Tell him it’s urgent.’

‘Just a moment,’ said the woman. The line went silent then clicked. I heard the ringing tone and imagined it booming round Billy’s house. I tapped the seconds away with my foot against the frame of the booth. ‘Come on to fuck,’ I said. I nudged open the door so that I could see further up the road. There was still no sign of them. I heard Billy’s voice at the other end of the line and the woman asking him if he would accept the charges. I thought I was saved. But just then, the black sleekness of the Lexus appeared on the road outside. It wasn’t going very fast. As it came to the entrance to the cemetery, I expected it to turn in and try to cut me off. But it didn’t. It kept moving towards me. I hid myself by pushing into the space between the phone and the side.

‘Now putting you through,’ said the woman.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Billy.

‘Sugar’s here,’ I said. I nearly burst out crying. ‘He’s going to fucking shoot me.’

‘Where are you?’

I swallowed as I watched the Lexus slow down as it got near the phone box.

‘By the cemetery,’ I whispered.

‘Wait there,’ he said. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’

The car stopped. Bunty got out.

I dropped the handset and charged onto the pavement. Bunty quivered and stepped towards me, his arms wide as if he was trying to catch a fucking animal or something. I stopped and sagged my shoulders like I'd had enough. He made his move to grab me. I pulled a good dummy and kicked him right in the fucking stones.

'You dirty wee bastard,' he said as he crouched forward. 'I'm going to fucking kill you.'

I felt like giving him a few more, but I wanted to get a head start on the rest of them. As I sprinted towards Billy's house, I wondered if I would meet him before Sugar appeared. But I didn't. I only got as far as the hoardings when I heard an engine screaming behind me. I turned and saw the Lexus.

'Fuck,' I said.

I glanced at the car park of the Institute and knew the cunts would get me if I tried going that way. All I could do was climb into the yard and hope that Billy turned up before Sugar got me. I bent forward and ran towards the navy blue panels. I jumped as I reached them and just managed to get my fingers on the edge. My feet scrabbled against the paintwork. I wedged my toe into the joint between the boards and climbed high enough to get my elbow over the crest and swing my leg up.

I almost gave in when I saw the size of the drop on the other side. There was a small outcrop level with the path I'd just climbed from. It was maybe a couple of inches. Beyond that was a supporting framework of long posts and scaffold tubes that rose from a steep slope of broken bricks, bits of steel, and pit waste. I glanced towards the twins before letting myself down. My tracksuit pulled up my belly as I tried to land on the ledge. My toe touched solid ground so I eased more of my weight on it. I was planning how I was going to clamber to the bottom when my foothold started to give. My fingers lurched for the wooden struts as I tried to stop myself from falling. I almost got a hold, but my feet slid against the wet ground and I tumbled down the slope of rubble.

I landed on a pile of wet earth. It clung to me as I rolled in it. I eventually pulled myself to my feet and tried to run. I managed to stagger for a few steps before stumbling and falling to the ground. I heard the hoardings rattle as somebody struggled to climb it.

'Wee shagger,' he called.

Eddie had pulled himself onto the top of the hoardings. I saw him check out the slope of debris and the props supporting the panels. There was no way he was going to follow.

‘You’re fucking getting it so you are,’ said Eddie.

‘Come on then you fucking cunt.’

‘You’ll not be so fucking cocky when I get a hold of you.’

‘Aye, your mammy.’

His face disappeared. I knew the cunts would soon be circling the yard, looking for a way in. I trudged across the reddened mess of crushed brickwork and broken concrete. When I was hidden amongst the trees that grew round the signal hut, I scanned the hoardings. After a couple of minutes the twins climbed over by the gate. Bunty followed. Last of all came Sugar. When he was on the ground, the others huddled round him. I could see them nodding at him. He pointed to where I was. It wasn’t a surprise. There was nowhere else to hide.

I hunted around the undergrowth as they got closer. My foot tapped something solid. I bent and cleared weeds from a bit of metal then ripped the cunt from the strands of yellowing grass that hugged it to the ground. It was a short bit of scaffold tube. Long enough to give some fucker a sore head. A snail was stuck to it, so I picked it off and flicked it into some briars.

I moved towards the signal hut. Its roof was sagging. The chimney was crooked like one of Andrew’s fingers. The door was secured with a padlock. I ran at it and kicked the cunt as hard as I could. It opened it enough for me to squeeze in. Then I shut it behind me, leaving enough of a gap so that I could see what was happening. It was really quiet, but then a magpie cawed and I knew the cunts were close. Straight after that, George crashed into the scrub. Eddie appeared beside him.

I turned from the door and went inside, putting my hand out to feel the way. When I came to a wall I stopped. Coldness ate into my back as I leaned against it and lowered myself to the floor. It took a few seconds for my eyes to become accustomed to the dark. I must have raised some dust because I had to rub my nose to stop from sneezing. Then I noticed an old bit of tarpaulin. I dragged it to the corner and crouched under it. I wrapped my fingers round the scaffold tube and waited.

The door was kicked open and Eddie coughed. ‘It fucking stinks.’

‘Shut up you fucking prick and get in there,’ said Sugar.

I heard his footsteps as he tried to creep over the gritty floor. My thighs were cramping. I could feel the sting from the nettles. But I kept myself still. I knew that Eddie would be finding it hard to see in the dark. I clenched the tube and waited like a preying mantis.

‘I can’t see a thing in here,’ he said.

‘Sure, use your fucking lighter.’

The flint scraped and flashed and was followed by an orange glow. ‘I don’t think he’s in here.’

‘You’ve not even fucking looked.’

Jimmy Mac points his pistol. When the man was close enough that a wild shot would not miss, he launches himself into the air and fires. Eddie screamed as the bullet enters his head. Jimmy moves quickly to the entrance and despatches the other twin with one bullet. He rushes out of the signal box and into the sudden brightness. He waves his pistol but Sugar is already pointing his. Jimmy sees it flash. The bullet hits him like a kick in the guts. He drops his gun and falls to the ground, his nose filled with the smell of burning powder.

His jarring neck brings him back to consciousness. He sees hints of blue and grey behind dark lines and blotches. He realises he’s watching the sky through the branches and leaves of trees. His head continues to jerk. He’s being dragged along on his back. He tries to tug his leg free and someone says.

Sure, it’s alive.

Jimmy lifts his head and sees that his feet are being gripped by the twins.

All right there? one of them says.

They drop him and a face is pressed next to his. It had a deep gash on its cheek.

Do you see what you did?

He kicks Jimmy hard on the side. Jimmy grunts with the pain. They sit on him and bind his ankles and wrists. He watches one of them throw a rope over a high branch and strain against it. His legs rise then his body bends as his hips leave the ground. He grunts again as blood rushes to his head, bringing a thumping pain behind his eyes.

The other twin lends a hand and together they sing as they hoist him into the air.

Hi ho, hi ho, its off to work we go.

Shut up you pair of fucking idiots, says Sugar.

Jimmy's head bounces against the trunk of the birch. He gets a close up of silvery bark that peels like paper. Then he's spun round until he sees jeans and tracksuits wet to the knees. A scaffold tube lies in the grass. It's smeared with blood. A hand grabs his hair and twists his neck up. Sugar cracks him in the face with the butt of his gun. He growls into Jimmy's ear.

I'm going to send you to your mother in fifteen different packages.

Jimmy Mac stares into the eyes of the paramilitary. Bit late son, he says. The old dear passed away months ago.

Sugar turns to Bunty. We're wasting our time here, he says as he cocks the pistol.

'Don't shoot me,' I said. 'Please don't shoot me.'

My voice echoed round my head, shrill as a lassie's. The twins laughed and Sugar slapped me again on the ear. He lifted me by the collar and bent over until our faces were inches apart.

'What's happening with my fucking money?'

'I haven't got it,' I said. 'Honest I haven't.'

'Where is it then?'

I watched the upside down legs and knew they were all twitching to kick me. 'Billy's going to give you it.'

'And try and trap me with the Peelers?' He shook me again. 'Do you think I'm fucking stupid?'

'We haven't spoke to the police,' I said.

He held his hand over my nose and mouth. I tried to move my head so that I could breathe, but he had me trapped against the tree trunk. After a few seconds I started to buck. He let me go. 'Don't lie,' he said. 'We fucking well saw them.'

'We were going to give you the cash,' I said between gasps. 'The cops were only there for back up.'

'So they were involved?'

'But not officially,' I said. 'Just to make you leave me alone.'

Sugar turned to George. 'Where's that tube?'

George bent to pick it up from the grass. His head was covered in blood.

'Let me do it,' said Eddie.

'No me,' said George.



Sugar put his hand out. 'Give it here.'

George handed it over. Sugar hefted it in his hand. He spun it up in the air like he was a drum major at a walk. 'Good choice of weapon, so it is.'

'It fucking hurts,' said Eddie.

'What one of you wants to get him back?' asked Sugar.

'Can't we both do him?' said George.

'Now you're being fucking greedy,' said Sugar.

'What about me boss?' asked Bunty. He was leaning on a length of wood as if he was a golfer waiting for his turn at the tee. 'The cunt got me right on the cherries.'

Sugar looked at me. 'What do you think?'

I knew there was no point in pleading.

Bunty came close and punched me on the kidneys. The pain of it made me squeal. Sugar laughed.

'Do you think that hurt?' he said. 'Wait until you get the rest of it.'

He turned to the twins and asked what one of them had the worst injury. The two of them started to argue about it.

'Come on to fuck,' said Sugar. 'The boy's waiting.'

George nodded and agreed it was Eddie. Sugar was generous though. He said that George could have a punch or a kick. George smiled as he looked at me. He interlocked his fingers then stretched them out until they cracked. He rubbed his palms together. Sugar told him to get on with it. George brought his arm back and punched me between the legs. It was that sore, pure sickness left my stomach and gushed into my throat. It trickled from my nose and my mouth. I had to blink when it went into my eyes.

Sugar lifted his leg like he was going to kick me, but stopped as his foot touched my head. Then he twisted his big fingers into the front of my tracksuit. 'There's one lesson you can take away with you now. It's something that'll stand you in good stead for many a year to come.' My head banged against the tree trunk as he shook me in time with the words.

'Never in your life fuck with the Blacknecks.'

He stepped back from me and spun the pipe in the air again. Then he handed it to Eddie.

'Now it's a fair beating,' he said.

'Ankle or knee?' asked Eddie.



‘Your choice,’ said Sugar. ‘One hit.’

‘Sure, it might take two,’ said Eddie.

‘I’ll do the second one,’ said George.

‘You’ve had yours,’ said Eddie.

‘That was nothing,’ said George.

‘Shall I do it myself now?’ asked Sugar.

‘No,’ said Eddie.

‘Well get the fuck on with it.’

### Chapter Thirty-Three

The old man in the corner's machine started to beep. The nurse quick-stepped towards him. Her shoes squeaked on the floor and her keys jangled like she was a jailor. She bent over him and called his name. She nipped him and put her ear to his mouth. She reached for a red cord and yanked it. About a minute later, these two other nurses and a doctor pushed through the swing doors. They weren't in a real fucking hurry. The curtains were pulled round the bed. I could see their shadows behind it. I closed my eyes and listened to them. Along with their whispering, I could hear the tapping and scraping of the ratchet as they adjusted the bed. It sounded like a woman running, her heels clipping and scratching along the wooden floor.

The chair at the side of Jimmy Mac's bed scrapes as it's pulled out. He knows who's there by the smell of her perfume. A bag crunches as if she's drawing out flowers and grapes and sweeties. Then he feels the heat of her as she kisses him and whispers in his ear.

What have they done to you?

Jimmy wants to talk to her, but he can't. He can't even move his fingers. He can breath, but that's about it. A tube going into his nose pumps food into his belly. He's got a line into one of his veins where they send in drugs and that. Or take out samples for their tests. Any time he wants to pish, it just drips out of him without any fucking effort at all. So there must be a pipe in there as well.

A doctor comes over. Jimmy listens to him tell Flora about the bullet entering his brain and the fact he's in a fucking coma.

What are his chances?

Very slim, says the doctor.

Jimmy tries to tell her he's not finished yet. But all that came out of his mouth is a choking sound that makes her stand over him. The doctor tells her that's normal, they all do that, it's not a sign for good or bad or anything, just that the body's doing its basic functioning. They'll soon know if things go wrong because the machines will start bleeping.

When I woke up it was morning. Aswad were on the radio with their song, Shine. This fat woman was pushing a trolley along the ward. She stopped at the foot of my bed. 'Do you want some breakfast son?'

'Aye.'

She swung the table over me so that I could reach the porridge. When I lifted a spoonful she told me to be careful because it was pure roasting so it was.

‘Could you put more milk in it?’

She tutted and called me a wean. But she gave me a smile as she said it, so I thought she was probably just kidding with me. When she moved onto the next patient, I glanced round the ward. I noticed that the old man in the corner was gone. The bed didn’t have any sheets on it except the bottom one. It was totally flat like it was brand new out of the factory. The curtains were tucked into the wall. All the flowers he had, were decorating the nurse’s station.

I wondered if the old cunt was dead.

I finished my breakfast and this other woman collected the plates. Then a nurse gave me some drugs. The pills were hard to get down, but I managed them all right with a drink of water. I lay back with a paper and waited for them. I was half way through the sports pages before the ache in my leg started to ease. I felt more relaxed and the bed became pure cosy. I tried to read about Rangers last game in the league, but my eyes kept closing, so I leaned into the pillow and gazed at the ceiling. There was a damp patch that looked like a sweat stain on a sheet, or one of them tests shrinks give to work out how fucking mental you are.

The twins swagger into the ward. Eddie’s got this huge bouquet. They laugh with the nurses who point them towards the bed. As they get closer, Jimmy tries to push himself upright, but he can’t move. All he can do is lie there while Eddie breaths in his face.

Not so cocky now, are you?

George puts the flowers on the bedside table.

We’ve a message for you.

From Sugar, says Eddie.

George leans over and whispers into Jimmy’s ear. Never fuck with the Blacknecks, he says.

He nips the skin beneath Jimmy’s ear. It hurts, but Jimmy can’t even grimace. He tries to shout but all that comes out was this gurgle. George smiles and copies the sound as if he was taking the pish out of one of them Mongoloid weans.

Is that right? asks Eddie.

George makes another choking noise.

You want an extra pillow? asks Eddie.

George grips Jimmy by the hair and makes him nod.

Eddie lifts the pillow and holds it over Jimmy's head. The nurses walk about as if they can't see what's happening. Jimmy tries to shout again. He hears George laugh as the smell of fresh sheets is pushed into his face. His head echoes with the rattle of his breath. His body starts to twitch. Eddie presses harder.

I lurched forward, gasping for air as I awoke into the brightness of the ward. I pushed the covers out of the way and tried to get up. But I couldn't move because my leg was trapped. Suzanne was bending over me. Her eyes were creased and her hand came up to stroke my head.

'You've had a bad dream,' she said. 'You're all right.'

I was that full of panic I reached my arms out and held her. She went pure rigid for a wee while before cuddling me back. 'There there,' she said. After a bit, I dropped my arms from her. She pulled away and frowned at me, her lips tight as if she didn't know what the fuck to do.

'How long have you been standing there?' I asked.

'About ten minutes.'

'Where's Michael?'

'He's at work,' she said. 'And Sophie's at nursery.'

She glanced round the ward then nodded to the pile of homework on my bedside cabinet.

'Have you been getting on with it?'

'It's hard to concentrate in here,' I said. 'Every time I start an old man pegs it and the place is running with doctors and nurses.'

'But your exams are in three weeks.'

'For fuck sake,' I said to her. 'I'm doing my fucking best.'

'Don't talk to me like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like that.'

'I'll talk how I fucking like.'

'Jamie.'

'Suzanne.'

'I only want what's best for you.'

'Do you fuck.'

She glanced around to see if anybody was listening. 'Sh,' she said.

‘Shoosh your fucking self.’

She opened her mouth then shut it again. Then she sat down and flicked through a magazine. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. The mark seemed like it was spreading. I turned to face Suzanne and she was looking at me.

‘What in the name of God were you climbing on the hoardings for?’

‘I just wanted see what was going on in there.’

‘But you could have been bloody well killed.’

‘I know.’

‘Just be more careful in future.’

‘I will.’

She leaned forward as if she was going to start with all the love shite or something, when the doors swung open and Billy came in. He put his hands in his jacket pockets as he stood at the bottom of the bed. He smiled at me, with just an edge in it when his eyes wavered towards Suzanne.

‘All right wee man?’

‘Not so bad,’ I said.

He ducked his head as if he was dodging a blow and cast his eyes about the other patients. ‘It’s like the fucking morgue in here.’

Suzanne grimaced as if he’d dropped a pile of plates. ‘Shh,’ she said.

‘This is no place for a youngster to recover.’

‘He’s only going to be here for another couple of nights.’

‘They want to make sure I’ve not got any complications.’

‘In the head,’ he said.

‘Not funny,’ she said.

He looked at me and rolled his eyes. ‘I’m only having a laugh.’

‘Well there’s a time and a place.’

‘The boy needs cheering up,’ he said.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘But he doesn’t need encouraging.’

‘Why not?’

‘He’s in enough trouble as it is.’

Billy glanced at me and then back at her. He held his hand up. ‘Back up a bit,’ he said. ‘You asked me to meet you here. So at least try and be fucking civil to me.’

Suzanne had a deep breathe. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m worried about the boy.’

‘I am as well.’

‘I know you are,’ she said. ‘That’s why I wanted to talk to you.’

‘Go ahead then.’

She nodded at the door. ‘Outside,’ she said.

When they left I picked up the plastic bag she’d put on the side of the bed. I pulled out the copy of Melody Maker. The cover had a picture of Liam Gallagher and a headline saying they had an exclusive interview. I popped one of my sweeties into my mouth and turned to page 27. I was just getting to a fight the brothers had in a London hotel, when I spotted my ‘real’ mammy and daddy come back through the swing doors.

Billy was talking and Suzanne was tilting her head as she listened. It was like she’d just found out that he was really interesting or something. When they stepped past the front desk he leaned really close to her and said something that made her laugh. She stopped smiling when she got to the side of the bed. He stood next to her like he was some sort of tough guy guarding his woman. I wondered what Michael would think if he was to see it.

‘Right,’ she said.

She started with the same fucking shite Hitler had gived me in the Rector’s office. And Billy was fucking smiling as she went on. I smiled back at them because I was half expecting them to tell me that I should relax for the summer and concentrate on my recovery for now. We would start again in the autumn and I would be double ready for the following year.

There’s no shame in being put back, Billy would say. Not when you’ve suffered such a fucking battering.

But that wasn’t what they had planned for me. They had talked about it, but they thought it would be better to focus me on the future, rather than let me wallow.

‘After all,’ said Billy. ‘The devil makes work for idle hands.’

Suzanne gazed at him when he said that. It was as if he’d just made it up himself.

So what they were going to do, she told me, was to pay for some guy to come round my house every fucking night and drum into me all the lessons I should have had when I was gallivanting around London and that.

‘That’s brilliant,’ I said.

She was that pleased with herself she didn’t even get the sarcasm.

‘And when your exams are done,’ said Billy. ‘You’re going to stay with them in Edinburgh.’

I was going to tell him he could get to fuck, but I saw the look in his eye, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

Fiona pulled a bottle of Irn Bru out of a bag. As she was putting it on the table, Morag bounced her bum on the edge of the mattress and laughed.

‘Springy,’ she said.

‘It’s not funny,’ said Tommy. He grabbed Morag’s arm. ‘Get off him.’

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Morag. ‘Are you jealous?’

Tommy frowned as he glanced at me. ‘Aye, your mammy,’ he said.

‘No your fucking mammy.’

I thought they were going to start shouting at each other, but they quietened down when the sister came over. Her face was tight and her voice was hushed. She told me it was two visitors to a bed, except for family. Tommy said he was my cousin. She pointed at him and said if there was any more noise, or if any of the other patients complained, then the lot of them would have to leave.

‘What a miserable old whore,’ said Tommy as she went back to the front desk. She spoke to the other nurses. They all looked at us. Morag sat down and bit at her nails. Fiona put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. ‘Look at the state of you.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’m like a fucking cripple in here.’

‘You are as well.’

‘Will you be in a wheelchair?’ asked Morag.

‘Shut up,’ said Tommy.

‘No you shut up.’

‘The pair of you shut up,’ said Fiona. She looked at me. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with these two, but they’ve been at it all day. You should have heard them on the bus.’

‘It’s fucking him,’ said Morag.

‘How?’ said Tommy. ‘What have I done?’

‘You know.’

He rolled his eyes at me. ‘See women,’ he said. ‘They do my fucking nut in.’

Morag stood up and stomped for the exit. ‘For fuck sake,’ said Tommy. He went to follow her, but Fiona stopped him. ‘Leave her alone for a wee while,’ she

said. 'I'll go and have a word.' She shouldered her bag and turned to me. 'Do you want me to get you something?'

'A bag of sweeties.'

'All right,' she said. 'I'll see you in a minute.'

I reached down to scratch at my leg. It was itchy underneath the plaster, but if I picked at the exposed skin above the knee, it seemed to ease it a bit. Tommy leaned over the bed to look closer. He tapped the cast with his knuckle.

'Does that hurt?'

'Not when I'm filled up with tablets.'

'What are they like?'

'They just make me relaxed,' I said. 'A bit dreamy.'

He pulled a marker out of his pocket. 'I wouldn't mind trying some,' he said as he wrote his name on the plaster.

'I'm sure they'll send me home with a few,' I said. 'And I don't need that many. It's not half as sore as it was when I came in.'

'You were in some mess then,' he said. 'When we found you my heart was in my mouth. I thought you were dead.'

'I can't remember you turning up.'

He got off the bed and sat in the chair. 'We got there just as Sugar and that were leaving.'

'What happened?'

'Billy saw you lying crumpled next to a tree,' he said. 'My da had to hold him back or he would have charged right into the lot of them.' He looked round the ward. 'It's just as well he didn't because Sugar had a gun.'

'I know,' I said. 'He put the fucking thing to my head a couple of times.'

'See if that had been me,' he said flexing his muscles.

'What?'

'I'd have shat myself,' he said.

'I'm surprised I never.'

'That would have been embarrassing,' he said. 'Imagine that on your chart?'

The ward door opened and Fiona and Morag came through. Tommy smiled at Morag and said he was sorry. She stepped closer to him and he put his hand round her waist. We chatted away about school for a few minutes. Then Tommy told us his latest plan. He was going to try and give the door-to-door selling a go in Glasgow.



Morag looked well proud of him as he went on about it. When he was finished she grabbed him by the elbow and nodded towards the corridor.

‘Hint taken,’ he said. He gave me one of the complicated handshakes. ‘We’re going to head down, so we’ll leave you on your own for a bit.’

‘I’ll maybe see you tomorrow,’ I said.

‘Aye,’ he said. He turned to Fiona as he walked out. ‘Mind the bus is in twenty minutes.’

When they were gone, Fiona pulled the curtain round the bed. She stared into my eyes as she lay on the edge of the mattress and snuggled into me.

‘What’s the matter with them two?’

‘Morag’s went and got herself pregnant.’

‘What does he say?’

‘That she should get rid of it.’

‘Does she not want to?’

‘No,’ said Fiona. ‘Her mammy’s going to kill her, but she thinks if she keeps it Tommy will stay with her.’

‘What do you want to do now?’ she said. We kissed and she touched me on the neck and the chest. My skin tingled as she brushed her hand down my stomach. But she stopped as she reached my bellybutton.

‘I don’t want to give you a heart attack.’

I gripped her by the hip and tried to turn my body to face her. The strain pulled something in my leg. It made me yelp.

‘Oh,’ she said as she lifted her head up. ‘What have I done?’

‘It’s nothing.’

She got off the bed and sat on the chair. ‘I better stop,’ she said. ‘Before I do you an injury.’ She picked up the bag of sweeties. ‘Do you want one of these instead?’

## CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Tracing Ideology and Desire in *Stony Cross* and its author.

## ***Introduction***

The physical and cultural setting of *Stony Cross* is informed by my personal experience of post-industrial depression in a place that is working-class and protestant. I believe that this context contributed to a subjectivity that was powerfully individualistic. In my writing of *Stony Cross* I wanted to explore this idea through the experiment of writing about a protagonist who is constructed in a similar cultural context, and who, like me, idealises male toughness and individuality. The purpose of this essay is to mark the connections between the protagonist of *Stony Cross* and its author. Through these connections and their relationship to the ideological theory of Althusser and its basis in Lacan's Mirror Stage, I will argue that *Stony Cross* and its accompanying critical essay contribute to human knowledge by offering a unique illustration of ideological interpellation.

I will begin by sketching out an intellectual framework based on Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation as laid out in his essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)'. (Althusser, 1977, pp. 121-173) Althusser's theory is illustrated using some of my personal history and cultural context, a process that exposes some of its shortcomings. The commentary goes on to deploy the critiques of Paul Smith (Smith, 1988) and Terry Eagleton (Eagleton, 1991) to develop the theory of interpellation using the psychoanalytic idea of overdetermination, and incorporating desire as revealed by the Lacanian Mirror Stage. (Lacan, 2002, pp. 3-9) These ideas focus the argument on how ideological narratives combine within an individual, manipulating the individual's desire to construct a subject that is subjected through its desire for agency.

Within the structures of the working-class mining communities of central Scotland, a highly desired male subjectivity embodies toughness and fearlessness, and is an agent of its own destiny. This ideal was mediated to me through the culture of my environment and focused through the body of my father. The thriller/detective novels I was addicted to as a boy mediated a similar ideal of manhood. The combination of these ideological strands overdetermined my desire for, and belief in, my own agency. As I grew into a young man I was confronted with hormonal and cultural determinants that made me feel pushed around and fragmented. However, they did not cause me to question my belief in my agency. Instead they caused me to

redouble my efforts to confirm this misrecognised view of myself. I did this by negating my conditions of existence through the media of reading fiction, through my use of drugs, and also by retreating into a world of fantasy.

These practises combined to give me the impression that I was an agent who was in control of myself, even though the life around me was falling apart. The evidence of my subjection should have made me accept my subjection, but it made me desire even more the vision of individual agency I saw within the fields of drugs, fiction and fantasy. I became lost in a vicious circle where I wanted so much to believe that I was an agent that I twisted my life to suit that belief and ultimately became enslaved to that belief. Like the Althusserian subject of ideology, I was, in effect, a subject of my own desire for agency.

The protagonist of *Stony Cross*, Jamie MacGregor, is brought into being in a similar context to me. He lives on the edge of a former mining community that celebrates an ideal of manhood as a self-directed agent who is physically strong and tough. This ideal is partly a construct of a working class environment where such attributes are valued and necessary. The ideal is focused through the paternal figures of the novel, Billy, Andrew and Sugar. It manifests in the popularity of boxing, a sport that Jamie takes up in the novel. The ideal of toughness and agency is also embedded and celebrated in the field of the music Jamie listens to. It is embedded within the culture of Protestantism mediated through one of Jamie's role models. The fantasy of agency is reinforced by the drugs he smokes. These ideologies and practises intersect in the body of Jamie, overdetermining a subject who misrecognises his own agency, and twists his environment to suit the misrecognition.

Jamie's illusion of agency is manifested in a fantasy alter-ego he constructs as a way of recreating the violence of a bully in order to suit his vision of agency. Jamie's relationship with Jimmy Mac is equivalent to the relationship Althusser's subject of ideology has with the illusion of its own agency. The fantasy is initially under Jamie's control, (or appears to be under his control), but as the novel progresses, the alter ego begins to inform the direction of Jamie's life. This brings Jamie to a crisis of subjection similar to mine.

*Stony Cross* is an illustration of the subject of ideology's relationship with the illusion of agency and how that subject is subjected by that illusion of agency. There is another novel that carries a similar illustration, that of *1982 Janine* by Alisdair Gray. (1984) Also set in working class, industrialised Scotland *1982 Janine* has a

protagonist, Jock McLeish, who lives part of his life in fantasy, and whose fantasy exerts more and more control over him as his life progresses. Jock is an Althusserian subject who acts out his illusion of agency in masturbatory fantasies constructed where he has control over a cast of women. *Stony Cross* develops that idea by foregrounding Lacan's mirror phase in the ideological illustration. Like the infant who looks in the mirror and does not quite see itself, but sees itself as a development, as a future self who is in a sense, someone else, Jamie, through the ideological mirror, sees himself in his fantasies as Jimmy Mac, a construction of ideology that is offered to him as an illusory ideal of agency that leads him into a state of subjection.

## **Chapter One**

This chapter begins with a brief précis of Althusser's ideas on ideology and the ideological construction of the individual subject. The ideas are illustrated by applying them to my cultural context, which is similar to that of the fictional Stony Cross, and how that context may have influenced my subjectivity. However, the illustrations introduce limitations that can only be addressed by moving beyond Althusser and into the work of Lacan that informs him. By the end of the chapter I will argue that subjection to ideology is wrought through implanting a desire for individual agency within the subject.

In his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', Louis Althusser states that in order for a social formation to have ongoing productivity, it needs to 'reproduce the conditions of production' (1977, p. 123). These conditions are the farms, factories and machines as well as their human operators. Workers are paid enough wages to marry and produce children who will grow up to take their place in the workforce. Schools and other agencies teach the children how to find their place within the societal hierarchy and obey its rules. These agencies are organised as-

1. The Repressive State Apparatus, (RSA), which Althusser says 'functions by violence' (1977, p. 136) but qualifies this by saying that this apparatus, although it may use ideology, is ultimately powered by violence, or the threat of violence. The RSA comprises the police, the courts, the prison services, the armed forces.

2. The Ideological State Apparatuses. (ISA) Althusser lists them as the religious, the educational, the family, the legal, the political, the trade unions, the media, culture. These apparatuses function mainly through ideology, but they may use violence when necessary. (1977, p. 136)

The process of ideological construction begins before we are born; our selves and our subjection to ideology are 'always already' constructed. (1977, p. 64) For example, a girl may be prepared for with a drawer of pink clothes and a future mapped out for them in skirts and dolls; a boy with blue clothes and a future in which they don't cry, and they fight and take the lead when it comes to sexual matters. Althusser argues that the ideological construction of subjects is achieved through a process he terms 'interpellation', (1977, p. 160) a process that involves hailing,

subjection and recruitment. He illustrates his argument through the hailing of a police officer. (1977, p. 163) When an individual turns to answer the hail, the fact of their turning transforms them into a subject of the law, and therefore accountable to the law. The subject being hailed by the police officer has been physically positioned as an individual with visible boundaries between it and the other subjects, an individual accountable in the eyes of the law. The subject of the hail is, then, positioned to see itself as an individual who is responsible for its own actions. It is, at least in its own perception, an individual agent.

When born, our relationships with others, and society, continually reinforce this idea. I was told as a child that I was clever, and had the ability to rise out of our council scheme. I was special, different from the other boys, unique. My parents held me in their arms and whispered my uniqueness into my ears. They gave me a name, Mark, something separate, a boundary, a limit. Most of my friends call me this. I have other names that mark me out as an individual. Mark Livingstone McNay. Unique. Special. The government gave me a code, my National Insurance Number. This individualises me, make me unique.

I was raised in a village called Twechar situated 12 miles to the north east of Glasgow. It was originally constructed to house protestant miners imported from Ulster. The 'old fellow' in Chapter 12 of *Stony Cross* is from Ulster, but not of the period of the original migrants which were in the late nineteenth century. (Bruce, 1990) At its peak between the wars, Twechar had a population of two thousand. Its mining and associated industries employed men from surrounding villages. It was traditionally protestant, the centre of an industrial landscape that had shops, bars, a Masonic Lodge, and an Orange hall. There was a railway network that moved coal to the smelting works of Lanarkshire. By the time I was born the Forth and Clyde canal was disused, the mines were worked out, the countryside was peppered with spoil heaps we called bings, a lot of people were unemployed, and the shops and pubs were beginning suffer. Substance misuse, sectarianism, and an aura of swaggering manhood were endemic.

*Stony Cross* is set in the period of September 1994 until May 1995. The landscape is post-industrial, the culture protestant. It was a mining town, but the pit has been closed for just over a decade. The town has suffered a downturn since the closure that has been exacerbated by the cutbacks of the Thatcher and Major governments. Most of the industries associated with mining have also closed. There

are no steel mills, foundries or forges. The railway yards have been ripped up and scrapped. Unemployment is rising. The local economy is shrinking because people do not have as much to spend. Shops are closing down, making the main street seem empty and uninviting to visitors. The relationship with Ulster is suggested in the sectarianism, in the familial relations of the McKinleys and in the history of residents like the old fellow of Chapter 12. The parallels between my home town and *Stony Cross* should be obvious. These parallels suggest that the ideological matrix that constructed me is very similar to the fictional one that constructed the protagonist of *Stony Cross*.

My position as an individual agent was, in part, constructed through the body of my father. He was a skilled tradesman, a position for which he had trained whilst enduring the paltry wages of an apprentice. He showed responsibility by bringing home his wages and making sure his family was never hungry. He worked hard making our house a fit place to bring up children. We had new shoes and trousers at the beginning of every school year. He encouraged us to apply ourselves to our lessons. He was physically strong, due to his work as an electrician in the days before power tools. A couple of evenings a week he worked out at the gym. He often pumped his muscles up and had my brothers and I squeeze them. This showed me that the body of a man has firm boundaries between it and its world, rather than a being that has a smooth interaction, or is interwoven, with its domain. My father's body was the physical manifestation of his pride as an individual workman. Material strength and activity represented his ability as a husband and a father who can provide. They were major constituents of his manhood.

My father often said he wanted to move us away from Twechar and buy a place where we could be separate from everyone else, no neighbours to overlook us. A smallholding where he could be self-sufficient and not need to rely on anyone for anything. A place where he could work on his cars without anyone complaining about the noise, or nosing into his business. Yet he was never prepared to take the risk of a mortgage. Perhaps because it meant going to someone and asking them for a loan of money. Letting go of his own agency and becoming dependent on the whims of another.

My father's desire for separation was reinforced in his choice of reading matter. He enjoyed biographies of people like Ranulph Fiennes or Chay Blyth or Ted Simon. He liked to consume these 'one man against the wilderness' tales as he sat by



the fire, as if he had found a place where he could act out his need to wander the earth as a free man, his body still chained to the family. Sometimes his frustration with life was palpable, like he couldn't understand how his apparently free choices had left him saddled with a lifetime of hard work. Luckily for us he was schooled in accepting the consequences of his actions, taking responsibility, so he never left us, he continued to provide for us.

In the early eighties he was unable to find work for a few weeks. He spent a morning going to the Unemployment Bureau. He left without completing his claim. He said afterwards he thought the other men in the queue were idlers, 'wasters', not honest workmen like him. This episode can be read as a refusal to be recruited as a government statistic and subjected to a system of individualised numbers. A refusal to be interpellated by an ISA, the Benefits Agency. But it can also be seen as symptomatic of the 'pride' of the Protestant workman. He was always already a subject of the Educational and Religious ISAs. These organizations had interpellated him as a free-willed individual who, though battling through a blizzard of misfortune, was capable of surviving without government handouts. He was constructed as a responsible, productive, and strong-willed adult, a man who could look after himself.

Before the narrative gets deeper into an explanation of the ideological bases for my father's motivations, I should take a paragraph to point out his relevance to the novel. His figure stands over my representations of male role models in the novel. He and my grandfather are combined to give the character of Andrew. My father's critical mind, his self-educated observation of sectarianism and its effects on the community was transposed into the dialogue of Andrew. (Although the physical description is closer to my father's father, an old miner who spent his last years smoking despite his pulmonary problems and heating his legs against his allowance of free coal.) A stronger representation of my father comes in the form of Billy McKinley, also an electrician. (Although my father wouldn't countenance joining a sectarian organisation like the Orange Lodge.) Billy is physically strong. He has the body of a man who works hard. He is skilful in his use of tools. He suffers from the same levels of pride and responsibility. (Of course there is the matter of his absent relationship with Jamie and the lack of responsibility this suggests, but this is partly resolved later in the novel when it is revealed that his apparent lack of responsibility towards Jamie is in fact due to Suzanne's rejection of Billy rather than the other way around. Not that it is so simple as I point out later in the essay.) Billy takes his

responsibility as a member of the community seriously. He helps the elderly. Like my father, he would never accept state handouts because he is a man who can look after himself. His opinion of people who claim benefits is apparent in Chapter Thirteen.

My depiction of my father makes it seem like he is the perfect Althusserian subject, determined by ideology, yet acting as if he is an individual with agency. But what I have written about him describes only a small part of his subjectivity. There are aspects of his being that could be used to critique Althusser's vision of ideological construction. For example, he is the son of a miner, who was the son of a miner. If, as Althusser avers, the primary interest of the forces of production is in the reproduction of the relations of production, then why is it that the only son of my grandfather did not replace him in the coalfield? Or at least become a worker of the same grade, someone who labours on a building site, or breaks rock in a quarry, or who digs ditches for a living. The fact was that my grandfather secured an apprenticeship for my father because he was determined that a son of his was not going to spend his working life crawling through sodden tunnels deep in the earth. This sense of generational improvement was passed through my father and on to me.

This sense of generational improvement is also apparent on the pages of *Stony Cross*. Suzanne is a lawyer who was raised by a mineworker. Billy is an electrician who was raised by a miner. Throughout the novel, Jamie is encouraged to do his schoolwork by his carers. In Chapter Two Esther tells him he can eat after he has done his homework. In Chapter Three Andrew questions him about sectarianism in a way designed to make Jamie think. Billy orders Jamie to return to school in Chapter 28. Billy and Suzanne pay for a tutor to help Jamie in his studies. (Chapter 33) In the McKinley household, Tommy is criticised for his lack of ambition, whilst his brother is praised for trying to get on.

Althusser's theory of an ideologically constructed subjectivity is too crude to accommodate this urge in people for self and generational improvement. In his book, *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith (1988) suggests that the problem with Althusser's view is the rigidity of his Marxist deterministic thought. Smith goes on to use the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to promote a version of interpellation and subjectivity that is more subtle and complex, yet is Althusserian in its foundation. The subject, according to Smith, occupies a position that is structured by 'an overdetermination in the subject's process of construction'. (1988, p. 32) According to the psychoanalytic dictionary of Laplanche and Pontalis, overdetermination is the idea that 'formations

of the unconscious (symptoms, dreams, etc.) can be attributed to a plurality of determining factors'. (1973, p. 292) Extrapolating this meaning onto ideological determination gives a picture of myriads of ideological narratives combining within us to form our subjectivities. For instance, my father's role as a good provider who wanted a better life for his son may have been constructed through an overdetermination of multiple strands of ideology working through his family (my child will have it easier than me), his attendance at Sunday school (the next life will be a better life), his schooling (self-improvement), the films he watched, the books he read, the post-war culture of societal improvement, the enlightenment idea of progress. In *Stony Cross*, Billy, by the end of the book, is working to make sure Jamie has it easier. He was a Sunday School child who has progressed to the Orange Lodge. He is involved in the societal improvement of Stony Cross and Belfast.

The argument that Althusser's theory of interpellation lacks subtlety is echoed by Terry Eagleton in his book *Ideology*. (Eagleton, 1991) Althusser's rigid structure of society, and the ease with which its subjects are interpellated, depends on a misreading of Lacan's essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience'. (Lacan, 2002, pp. 3-9) As a result, Althusser has mistaken what Lacan proposes as the ego for the whole human subject. This replaces the contradictions of the subject with the coherence of the ego. Eagleton thinks a more rigorous reading of Lacan would have positioned the subject in relation to the unconscious, which would have meant that it was influenced by the field of the other and all the contradictions it contains.

The subject's relation to the unconscious brings more than a multiplicity of meaning and determinants, it also brings desire into the equation.

For Lacan, the imaginary dimension of our being is punctured and traversed by an insatiable desire, which suggests a subject rather more volatile and turbulent than Althusser's serenely centred entities. (1991, p. 144)

In the example of my forebears above and what they wanted for their children, as well as the similar examples from the pages of *Stony Cross*, their inculcation into the matrix of ideology cannot be complete unless desire is taken into account. My grandfather's and father's desire for a better life for their children is part of what positioned them ideologically. It made them work hard in order to bring home enough wages to feed, clothe and educate their children.

Eagleton is partly right. Althusser's subjects are too easily constructed and instructed, they are far too compliant. However, despite what Eagleton says, the subject of Althusser is not without desire. In Althusser's theory of interpellation, the subject of ideology does not have to be whipped to work. It gets up and goes of its own free will. The subject of ideology desires what ideology wants it to desire.

The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandment of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection. (1977, p. 169)

Althusser's subject is easily subjected, not just because of the over-arching ideological structures that are pinioning it, but because the subject actually wants to be subjected. Interpellation is Althusser's idea of offering a structured solution to this idea, a way of seeing how ideology offers, or seems to offer, the subject what it wants when it is actually offering the subject what ideology itself wants, and at the same time it is training the subject to desire what ideology wants it to desire.

In order to explain how the desire of the subject of ideology may be complicit in the subjection of the individual to ideology, I think it will be useful to return to the starting point for Althusser's theory of interpellation, Jacques Lacan's paper, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* function; as Revealed by Psychoanalytic Experience.' (2002, pp 3-9) In this essay, Lacan suggests that the desire of the human subject is a desire for wholeness and control of our environment. This desire is revealed when we first recognise our reflection in a mirror and see ourselves as a whole being.

Lacan observed that when an infant first catches sight of itself in the mirror, it becomes fascinated. Its desire for the image becomes a physical 'leaning forward' the infant assumes 'in order to fix it in its mind.' (2002, p. 4) Lacan writes that this leaning forward of the infant towards its own image reveals a 'libidinal dynamism' (2002, p. 4), it will assume towards its own becoming, its own solidity. This solidity is a future ideal which Lacan alludes to in his use of the word 'imago' (2002, p. 4).<sup>1</sup> The infant is henceforth placed as a desiring subject in history, just as the grub or chrysalis is placed in history when it is compared to the butterfly.

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan here could be alluding to the perfect self of the future being, and also the fantasy figures of possible perfect-future-beings that we internalize. These fantasy figures are not yet introjected, the infant's mind is not yet capable, it doesn't yet have an ego, never mind introjections. Lacan is prefiguring the future complexities of the infant's captivation with the mirror, which is the first identification and is followed by numerous other identifications.

The imago of the mirror stage is the beginning of the infant's image of itself, the beginning of its construction of its own ego based upon an internalisation of an image of itself. The imago represents the infant's vision of its own transformation from the bundle of disjointed feelings coming from a body 'sunk in its motor impotence and nursling dependency.' (2002, p. 4) Looking in the mirror the infant moves its limbs about and slowly learns it can control them. The reflected image contributes to the transformation that is already happening within the infant's mind as it sees itself as a coherent whole that can move itself. The I in the mirror is a reflection of what the infant can be, a whole being that is in control of itself. Lacan refers to the I in the mirror as the Ideal-I, which is an image of how we would wish to represent ourselves; as a coherent whole, an individual with agency.

The libidinal dynamism revealed by the infant's exchange with the mirror hints at the infant's desire to become this Ideal-I. In this becoming, a becoming that can never actually take place, it will satisfy/slake the discordance between what it feels it is (disjointed/out of control), and what the image appears to be, (whole/ under control). This disjunction, this pair of Is that the infant has to incorporate, the 'I that observes' and the 'I that is observed' is resolved in the *I*, which is an I that can never be resolved. It is, after the mirror stage, distanced from itself, permanently alienated. To counter this alienation, it will forever seek to move towards the 'I that is observed' and anything that represents the feelings it gets when it views the 'I that is observed'; feelings of wholeness and being in control. However, any sense of wholeness or control is an illusion, and always accompanied by the realisation that the reflection is not quite the 'I who observes', it is a 'mirage'. (Lacan, 2002, p.4) In other words, the infant is leaning towards something that it thinks it recognises as itself, but is in fact misrecognition. It is a fiction that will never satisfy because the apparent wholeness is an observation of ourselves, an observation we can only undertake by looking at ourselves from a place that is not ourselves. The apparent wholeness can only be seen when we are split from ourselves and when we are negating ourselves.

The Ideal-I the child sees in the mirror, is also observable in the bodies of others, our parents, our siblings, our friends. Their apparent solidity, cohesiveness and ability seem attractive compared to our lack, unsettledness, clumsiness. Our libidinal drive attaches itself to them, causing identification which produces a fantasy of union, and also a transformation into something more like the other. Thus our egos develop as we internalise the images of others.



Yet wholeness is as far away as ever. The figure we desired when we first looked in the mirror morphs into a shadow of others becoming a thing we cannot discern amongst the twisting vortexes that is our desire mixed with the desire of others and the signs and symbols of language and culture. We will catch glimpses of what we believe to be the thing that will make us feel whole, but our desire is now forged in 'a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual' (2002, p. 4). We can never get to the bottom of it, although we will try and fix the damage with a host of substitutes. We get 'caught up in the lure of spatial identification' (2002, p. 6) where we look for what the mirror gave us, recognition as discrete individuals, but this recognition we will seek in the eyes of others. In this identification we continually modify ourselves to suit the requirements of the image, transforming ourselves in order to repair the split with whatever we think might stitch it, sublimating the desire for the Ideal-I with a desire for a 'succession of fantasies' (2002, p. 6) which can be buried within our consumption of food, sex, drugs, our need for recognition in the eyes of another, our need to bring things into our control. In the urges to fill ourselves, or connect ourselves, we prostrate ourselves at the feet of our imagined Ideal.

Our desire for this conjunction between ourselves and the reflected becomes an 'organic inadequacy of his natural reality' (2002, p. 6), a feeling that our world is not enough, that we are not enough, or what we have is not enough. We will attempt to repair our alienation, not realising it cannot be fixed. And worse than this, what made (and still makes) us feel like we are whole, is the very thing that causes the split. The mirror substitutes continue to alienate us from what we want, whilst appearing to meet our desire. We do not realise, or even if we do, we negate or deny the knowledge that the things that make us feel whole or in control are the very things that make us need to feel whole or in control. We have become enslaved to them, and enslaved by what provides them.

According to Althusser, ideology is 'a mirror structure' (1977, p. 168) that we lean towards and into. It offers us an 'imaginary distortion of the real relations' (1977, p. 155) of our existence. Ideology twists our perception of our conditions of existence and also twists our perception of our own relationship with those conditions. Ideology gives us recognition of ourselves as individuals. It offers us the fictional belief that we are agents, in control of ourselves, responsible for our lives and our position in it. It offers us order, certainty, coherence, stability. It offers us what we desire, so we take

what it offers. As subjects of ideology we are implicated in our position by our desire. We want something that ideology is offering us. It is in our acting out on this desire that enables ideology to position us.

By way of illustration I will return to my father, and describe how ideology was mediated through him and into me. My father spent a lot of time in his garage tinkering with the car. He never employed a mechanic. He would do the work himself and use any money he saved to buy tools. He was like the Protestant of Weber (1905), filled with a work ethic that never rested, forever proving he was a man, an individual with agency. He would sometimes ask me to help by handing him tools. In this, ideology was working through him, an agent of the Family ISA, to recruit me into the family as part of the process of my subjection. He said my name and I answered, and was recruited, again. I reached for a spanner in the toolbox. The feel of the cold metal individualised me because it made me physically aware of the boundary between me and the other. I handed it to my father, symbolically handing my power over, subjecting myself, again, to the ideological vision of me as an individual. As he looked at me, in his eyes I saw myself transformed from a barely restrained container of hormones, into a boy, his son, his property, connected to him but in a process of becoming separate from him. In his body I saw my ideal future, strong and capable, a free-willed individual who could work hard and provide for his family.

As I helped my dad in his garage, I worshipped him and was abject in my need for his recognition. I was captivated by my reflection in his eyes; a good boy helping his dad, a good companion for his dad, an extension of his dad. In this reflection I saw myself as part of the circle of Ideal-I men who had fixed the car. However, in my need for his recognition I was also captured by my dad, subjected to his will, subjected to the ideology that was mediated through him. This ideology was embedded in the training he gave me in the art of motor mechanics. I am now an Ideal-I man who is skilful at fixing cars. This ability lifts my esteem more than the knowledge that I am good with words, which is an effect of the ideology that was mediated through my grandfather and my father, ideology that tells me that my conditions of worth are placed in a certain area, that of the proletariat and its speciality, physical work. My Ideal-I is represented in ideas of manliness and applying that manliness to the world to make that world physically different, ideas that represent physical strength and control. Perhaps I feel better when I have fixed a car compared to writing a good paragraph because it is more 'manly'. It makes me

feel capable, skilful and strong. Even if my car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, I can fix it. I don't need the help of a mechanic. I can look after myself. I am a physical agent, an individual who does not need anyone else.

In *Stony Cross* there is an instance of this physical passing on of ideology. In Chapter Twelve, Jamie is pushing his uncle Andrew in his wheelchair. One of the wheels is wonky. This makes the work of pushing difficult. Billy spots them. He is busy at the church, helping to improve the building, putting his free time into the community, pursuing an agenda of societal improvement amongst the debris and degradation of the post-industrial landscape described by Andrew as Jamie pushes him along. Billy points out the defect in the wheel of the wheelchair. He picks up his toolbox and approaches. He is commanding, takes control of the situation, the model of agency whose working knuckles are compared to the bony and useless ones of Andrew. The usefulness of Billy's knuckles has already been explained in a previous scene in Chapter Eleven, where he and Jamie discuss his skill at boxing. At this point in the novel, Billy has introduced Jamie to boxing, he is taking him for runs, he is on the way to becoming an important role model. Jamie is beginning to worship him. He is already captivated.



## Chapter Two

Ideology constitutes human subjects whose subjection is wrought through their desire to be free-willed individuals. This desire is constructed through the implantation of an Ideal-I figure that the subject leans towards and is captivated by. In this chapter I will develop the understanding of how that desire is fuelled by two practises I had in common with Jamie MacGregor when I was a teenager; a tendency to fantasise, and a developing relationship with drugs. Before going into these practises, I will describe how my fantasy life was partly informed by my reading of detective novels and relate this to how Jamie's fantasy life is partly informed by the music he listens to. Fantasising and taking drugs combined with my background to overdetermine and increase my desire for an Ideal-I which became self-perpetuating and led me into subjection.

My desire for the Ideal-I of a muscular man who was an individual agent was reinforced by my avid relationship with fiction. As a teenager, I escaped from the realities of the post-industrial landscape through reading novels; mainly detective thrillers and other heavily plotted tomes. In a critique of the novel form which uses, amongst other theories, Althusser's concept of interpellation, Lennard Davis in *Resisting the Novel, Ideology and Fiction*, writes that novels offer readers a 'defensive structure' (1987, p. 11) that buffers them from the vagaries of life. However, intertwined with that help comes an interpellation that reinforces the reader's misrecognition as an individual agent, an illusion that hides and enables subjection.

The physical practice of reading gave me a similar sense of isolation and control that the infant gets when it sees itself in the mirror. Reading was an individual practice that separated me from my surroundings. I could read in a crowded room and be alone, a concrete individual with firm boundaries between others and myself. Reading gave me a fantasy of agency because I had physical control of a representation of life. I could read as fast or as slow as I liked. I could flick forward if I couldn't wait to find out what happens. I could go back if I wanted to reread a section to gain a deeper understanding, or savour an aesthetically pleasing phrase.

Of course my agency was a fantasy. Subjection became apparent when I tried to break free of the story. Then it was difficult to detach, to exert my control over the

illusion generated by the author. This was especially true if the novel was well written. I have read through the night when it was my intention to turn the light off at eleven. This is why some books are termed 'page turners'; the reader is driven to turn the pages, effectively subjected to the plot.

Within the pages of a detective novel I could act out my isolation in the form of a rebellious private eye who was in conflict with the structures of society. I was captivated by a mirror structure that contained an image of an Ideal-I who was in control of himself and his own destiny, an Ideal-I who was muscular and tough. No one pushed the figure of the detective around, or if they did they would pay a heavy price. Just as I identified with my image in the mirror, and introjected that image as the beginning of the formation of my ego, so I identified with and introjected the character of the detective, the lone hero fighting his way through a world that was against him. In effect, my reading of detective fiction modified the Ideal-I that I was leaning towards, making it tougher, more individualised.

Jamie MacGregor is not an avid reader of fiction. He is, however, an avid listener to music. In the songs he likes he is given the same sense of order that I was given in the plot of a novel. The tunes have a beginning, middle and end. They have rules that they obey, they have a melody that can be predicted through repetition. The tunes are mediated through strong men like the Gallagher brothers who handle the industrial landscape with ease. Or they portray characters like those of the Wu Tang Clan who 'ain't nuthin' ta f'wit.' (Wu Tang Clan, 1993) His Ideal-I is modified through his relationship with musicians and the ghetto subjects they sing about.

My desire for the Ideal-I of the lone hero was reinforced by, and intertwined with, my fantasy existence. Whenever I had a problem with someone at school, or a situation hadn't turned out as I had hoped, I would re-imagine the scene and turn it into a drama in which my actions aligned with my desire. For example, when rougher boys pushed me around I would have heroic fantasies about revenge and beating them with a few well-placed punches. This fantasy protected me from the fact that I wasn't like the tough boys, and gave me an arena where I could fight them without risk to myself. I would also fantasise about the girls I desired, changing my inept conversational skills into skilful flirting that brought them under my influence and into my bed. It should be obvious that my tendency to fantasise is reflected in the consciousness of Jamie. His heroic fantasies involve him morphing into a tough guy

called Jimmy Mac. He also morphs into Jimmy so that he can fantasise about having sex with a character from a pornographic magazine.

My fantasy Ideal-I figure gave me an identification that felt secure and in control. It gave me a sense of escape from the hormonal and societal determinants that made me feel pushed around. However, the agency and toughness I felt in the world of fantasy made the vicissitudes of reality even harder to bear, made me even more anxious in my dealings with the tough lads and the girls I desired. Therefore I was even more desirous of my fantasy Ideal-I. Thinking this through in terms of ideology, I was escaping from the reality of my subjection to ideological narratives by occupying the position of agency that ideology offered me. But, the security I felt when I occupied the position ideology offered me made the return to an awareness of my subjection even more difficult. I was therefore even more willing to escape the knowledge of my subjection, and equally desirous of the illusion ideology was offering me. I was, in effect, caught in a spiral of subjection where the direction I moved to escape the subjection only made my subjection worse.

My desire to occupy the position of the Ideal-I unaffected by the mores of societal conventions meant that my attitudes became more anti-authoritarian. I felt like I was becoming more individual, that I was being an agent by rejecting the rules of society. I became involved with a group of older boys and started to smoke cannabis. Soon I lost interest in school. I spent more and more time with people who enjoyed listening to Velvet Underground behind drawn curtains. It was like being introduced to the life at the bottom of the garden, or at the back of the wardrobe.

When I consider my upbringing, it becomes obvious to me that my father had been interpellated as a strong willed individual, a man with a powerful libidinal dynamism. It's reasonable to assume that the same forces that constructed him, constructed me and that I therefore have also been interpellated as a strong willed individual. Using cannabis contributed to this interpellation due to the illegality, which placed me outside the law. There I became a subject of the law, a subject of my desire for drugs who believed he was an individual and was free. I travelled to London looking for freedom and adventure. Drugs became the most important thing in my life. I soon descended into levels of degradation I couldn't have previously imagined. I attended soup kitchens for food. I stayed in night shelters. I slept rough. I regularly committed petty crime. I worked as a door-to-door salesman. I was beaten up on numerous occasions. One night in Central London, I was arrested with a large

amount of drugs and charged with intending to supply them. I wasn't imprisoned, but the consequences of that action pushed me towards a life that was increasingly individualised and anti-social.

I became friends with a man who was self-contained and tough. He seemed wise and knowledgeable. I wanted to be like him, someone who could become more able to handle the life I was leading. He had been in prison. He could fight with his fists, and was respected by the people we associated with. Yet he was fair in his dealings. He wasn't a bully. He would share his food and his drugs. He treated me with respect. He taught me how to handle the benefits system. He was muscled. He could box. He could walk and run for miles. My Ideal-I was modified through my relationship with him. The image of him that lives in my psyche is intermingled with the image of the character of Jimmy Mac who lives on the pages of *Stony Cross*.

This man taught me a lot of things. How to interact within houses like the one Jamie lives in when he is selling dusters and drugs. How to open up houses as squats, how to handle the benefits system. How to make a pipe. How to bypass an electricity meter. How to inject drugs.

The mirror of Lacan seems to offer the infant certainty, fixes its fluidity in a visible form. Injecting drugs is called fixing. Perhaps because it fixes the user's withdrawal symptoms. I saw it as fixing my life problems. My life was falling apart. I was again the uncoordinated child who is anxious about dismemberment. Injecting drugs fixed that because it gave me a feeling of cohesion, it fixed my desire by directing it in a recognisable channel. It made me know what I wanted. Even though it made me behave in ways that were out of control, it had the paradoxical effect of bringing my desire into control.

Internally I became more and more coherent, focused by my need for drugs, subjected by the ideological practices that go with taking drugs. However, this focus meant that I excluded other choices, making healthy decisions, food, shelter. As life external to drugs collapsed, became uncertain, my need for certainty increased. I became more focused on getting drugs and the person I became when I took them. Through the chaos, heroin made me feel like a solid individual who knew what he was doing, who had power over his own destiny. That is why it is called heroin. It is

named after the hero<sup>2</sup> and gives the user the impression that they are heroic. A Velvet Underground lyric says it ‘makes me feel like I’m a man.’<sup>3</sup> It helped to make me feel self-contained like my father appeared to be. It gave me the ability to go through life and speak to people with a level of disinterest I couldn’t manage without the drug. Heroin made me feel like I was being empowered. It made me feel like I was a protagonist in my own story, the perfect self who acted in a mirror of my life.

This Ideal-I image directly correlates with the image of Jimmy Mac. He is a hero. When he first appears to Jamie in the emotional aftermath of the fight in the school toilets, Jimmy is presented as someone whose toughness is manifested by his disinterest. When Plunk cuts in front of him he calmly grips him by the neck and pushes him back out and tells him to wait his turn like everyone else. He is fair and he is on the side of order. He is also tough, the exact quality needed in the situation to deal with someone like Plunk. The fantasy develops in the next paragraph. Jamie’s emotions and desire for revenge interweave with the narrative of fairness. But Jimmy Mac is not a perpetrator of violence in this situation. He is reacting to the violence of Plunk. Jimmy Mac’s violence is a reflection of how such violence can be dealt with and how the societal order can be re-asserted. It is also a reflection of the ideology of the individual where it is not a system or community that sorts thugs like Plunk out, it is individual men.

This ideology of the individual propelled me into the world of drugs. As I became more individualised, the figure of the lone hero became more important to me. The protagonists of the detective fiction I was so fond of belonged in the vanguard of the cult of the individual. That is why they were called the Hero. ‘1. A man with superhuman strength courage or ability, favoured by the gods. 2. A man, now also a woman, distinguished by the performance of extraordinarily brave or noble deeds’ (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2007). They helped to lift my existence from the grim and the banal. They reinforced the fantasies that gave my life a heroic edge, made it seem interesting and pleasurable.

As I walked the streets in my missions to buy drugs, keeping my eyes open for police and muggers, I fantasised that I was an unjustly discredited detective dodging

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<sup>2</sup> *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2007, ‘Origin German, formed as HERO (from its effect on the user’s perception of his or her personality) + -IN’

<sup>3</sup> Lou Reed. ‘Heroin.’ Perf. Reed and The Velvet Underground. *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Verve, 1967

the authorities and the mafia, trying to get to a meeting with Mr Big, the only man in the world who could help him. When I was successful, I would put my feet up on the coffee table and smoke heroin as if I was in the boardroom and Mr Big was nodding sagely as I told him what was happening in City Hall. If I wasn't successful, if I was captured by the police and lay in a cell withdrawing, somewhere in my mind I would be the noble defender of democracy and liberty who was caught in the barbed wire of state corruption.

However, as much as I wanted to be like these men, my real self contrasted greatly with them. Where they were agents of their own destiny, I was a subject who would do almost anything to get drugs. Where they were morally coherent, my ethics were contingent and ever negotiable. I felt terrible inadequacy about my inability to control my use of drugs, an inadequacy that was compounded in my comparison with the novelistic hero. This inadequacy made me desire even more the image of adequacy offered by the representations of the heroes. The enhancement of my inadequacy and my desire made me lean more towards the mirror offered by ideology. In my reading of pulp fiction, I became in effect, more of a subject of ideology. And this ideology interpellated me to believe I was an individual, an agent who is in control of its own destiny.

Meanwhile, my conditions of existence were deteriorating, and my desire to escape them was proportionately greater. My resources were increasingly directed to buying and consuming drugs. The other needs of my body and mind were neglected. This resulted in physical wants that made me more concerned with my own needs, concerns which combined with my need for drugs. When I didn't have them I started to withdraw. The symptoms were physical pain, sickness. My body told me I was short of something, and there was one thing that could take the pain away. I became increasingly fixated on that one thing. The libidinal dynamism that Lacan says is revealed in the mirror stage was channelled through this need for heroin, this actual bodily need which is also a human need for oneness, the bodily need fuelling the human need, making it greater. It drove me on, I became willing to give up everything, all other human relationships, in order to feed my identification with my Ideal-I.

I became single-minded in my pursuit of money and drugs, the opposite of the disinterested hero that I saw reflected somewhere in the smoke of heroin. My moral framework fell away. My world shrank until what was most important was getting



money for drugs. My human relationships were dependent upon the realisation of their monetary value. My life had been alienated, commodified. My primary relationship was with drugs, meaning that my primary relationship was with satisfying my own desire for my Ideal-I. The spiral of anxiety and desire had tightened so much that my primary desire was to escape the subjection through an identification with the very thing that was enabling my subjection.

An illusion of control is common to us all, but the obviousness of the evidence of subjection of addicted subjects suggests that their fantasy of control must be powered by an enhanced libidinal dynamism. This dynamism will not only be used by the subject's unconscious to deny the real facts of their existence, it will manifest in a conscious avoidance of the fact of subjection. One place where the subjected consciousness can hide from the fact of its own subjection is in the production of fantasy, a construction which, by its very nature, enables the subject to delude itself about its agency.

However, the propensity to fantasise by the addicted subject is more complex than I am suggesting. The subject who is an addict, or the subject who has the necessary libidinal dynamism that could, given the right circumstances, propel them into addiction, (i.e. a subject who will incline towards addiction, or addictive behaviours), always-already has the same dynamism towards misrecognition as the subject who tends to fantasise. Using drugs and using fantasy satisfy the same desire for wholeness and control, as well as signalling a similar lack of acceptance for the subject's fragmentation and lack of coordination. I did not just fantasise due to the conditions of existence as produced through my use of drugs, it may be that I fantasised because as a subject with a high libidinal dynamism driving me towards the mirror, fantasy was a place where I could satisfy that dynamism. I was not an addict who fantasised or a fantasist who was addicted to drugs. I was an addict, which is the same as saying I was a fantasist.

Just as the use of drugs fuels the desire to use drugs because it enhances the dynamism, makes the subject more reliant on the mirror, so the use of fantasy does the same. The fantasist does not accept their conditions of reality. They fantasise to escape those conditions, and to create better conditions where they are whole and in control. The result is that their real conditions of existence become more unsatisfactory, because they have lived in a place where they have more control and it is more difficult to accept less control than it is to accept the fact of having a level of

control that is not satisfactory, but that doesn't lessen. This dissatisfaction causes the subject to become even more inclined towards fantasy. To extend the metaphor, it becomes a 'slippery slope' that steepens, making it more difficult for the subject who fantasises to climb back to level ground.

Addiction caused a deterioration in my conditions of existence, making them increasingly dissatisfactory, which fuelled my wish to avoid them. The knowledge that I was out of control drove me towards a fantasy of control. The drive that powered these wishes was, as I suggested earlier, itself being fuelled by my use of drugs. I spent increasing amounts of time alone, fantasising. I would make plans about a future where I had kicked drugs and was working or in education. I would think about winning the lottery, joining the Foreign Legion, finding a woman and getting married. I would obsess about the lives of soap opera characters, what they were doing now that the programme had ended, angry about their choices, or annoyed with them due to their exploitation of others, as if I was an advisor who could tell them how better to live their lives. I'd think about women I'd known and finished with, or women I wished I'd had relationships with. I'd recreate our meetings and this time I would have the courage to speak to them and they would reciprocate and we would have a long and fulfilling relationship.

The ease with which my mind slipped into these fantasies was frightening. Especially if the fantasy concerned drugs. Like a teenager imagining sex with a woman, I would picture myself meeting someone who, by chance had a couple of bags. Then I would accompany them home, all the time building the desire within me, setting myself up for the time when the needle would slide into my vein. On the way I would correct myself, go back and redo the moment of meeting, adjusting the story according to the tension I felt in my body in order that I could build it to the best climax. By the time I had the powder in the spoon and the flame under it sending the water popping in tiny bubbles of steam, my mouth would be watering with want.<sup>4</sup> I would imagine filling the syringe with the liquor, then tapping it to remove any air. I would pump up my vein and as the imaginary needle drew blood from my body, and the plunger was on its way down. In doing this, I would almost get a rush. Then I would realise where I was and bite my pillow with the frustration of unmet desire, the frustration at not being able to leap the gap between me and my ideal self.

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<sup>4</sup> As I write this, I haven't used for 12 years, yet my mouth waters as I think closely of the syringe.



And the power of that frustration is a factor of the libidinal dynamism that lives within me, that was constructed by the ideological forces of my West of Scotland mining village. That was nurtured by the images of the tough men who surrounded me in the post-industrial landscape. That was focused through the hardened body of my father and his attitudes of self-help and self-improvement. That was encountered and reflected in the detective stories I read. That was acted out in the childhood fantasies that developed and intermingled with my life as a cannabis smoker to enhance my libidinal dynamism and propel me towards the individualised life of a heroin addict. A dynamism that became self-destructive. This same dynamism is played out in the body and mind of the protagonist of *Stony Cross*.

### Chapter Three

I have argued that my desire for individual agency was enhanced through my practises, causing a progressively tightening spiral of subjection. A similar theme is played out in the novel, *Stony Cross*. The protagonist, Jamie MacGregor, becomes caught in spirals of anxiety and desire that drive him towards an illusion of agency that masks increasing subjection. I will argue that Jamie's desire for agency is constituted and manipulated by ideology and his personal practise, and manifests within a fantasy narrative that leads him into subjection. However, at present I will focus on the setting of *Stony Cross*, a town where the ideal figure of manhood is physically strong and good at fighting. Jamie, as a subject embedded within that culture, is therefore subject to a similar desire. This desire is manipulated and strengthened through cultural practices that include listening to music and smoking pot.

The environment of Stony Cross is littered with the after-effects of the mining industry. Slag heaps have yet to be exploited for their use to the building industry. Large pieces of rusting metal poke from the ground. Holes in the earth show where stone was once quarried, or where subsidence has occurred. In the months leading up to the beginning of the novel, the Scottish Development Agency, (SDA), have secured European funding to regenerate the land. The SDA will cover all the mess and make it green and pretty again. A beautiful landscape where the population can relax and breathe air that is free of the smoke of the industrial revolution. And for the people to earn their living in this future, the SDA is going to build a couple of factory units. Everyone will have work again. It won't be the dirty and hard work of the mines. It will be cleaner and healthier.

This of course is great news for the townspeople, but the process of regeneration requires disruption and fragmentation. As the novel progresses, machines start to rip the earth apart. Dust and noise fill the air. An apparent chaos reigns. The environment is split, alienated from the population by the hoardings that surround the pit yard. Inside the area they are no longer allowed, pieces of mining history are cut from the ground and smashed by roaring diggers, then loaded into lorries and taken away. The environment of Stony Cross becomes a Lacanian dream of dismemberment (Lacan, 2002, p.6) a dream that represents one of the splits in the

cultural 'I function' of the town as a whole. The Ideal-I of Stony Cross is an amalgamation containing an idealised nostalgia for the proud and skilled protestant workforce who made the products that helped to fuel the industrial revolution and the British Empire. Another part of this amalgamation is a future ideal where there is full employment in whatever industry the SDA can attract to the town. Contrasting with this ideal, is a present that is filled with idleness, deprivation, despair and anxiety. The people of Stony Cross are thus subjected to a huge split between an ideal that was once true and may be true again, and the evidence of their present reality.

The distance between the idealised images of wholeness and aptitude of the past and the future, and that of the motor impotence (Lacan, 2002, p.4) of the present is, as I suggested in my argument about the libidinal dynamism of the addict/fantast, proportional to the strength of the desire of the subjects who want to bridge the gap. This desire is propelled by anxiety and hope, both of which are present in the population of Stony Cross. Its immediate manifestation is in a desire of the subject to negate the present conditions of its existence, which translates into a desire for escape. People escape towns like Stony Cross by physically leaving for more prosperous situations. England is a destination mentioned in the novel. (England is where I now live.) Or they escape psychically through making an idealised identification with a fantasy mediated through cultural activities like watching (or participating in) boxing or football, reading pulp fiction, watching television programmes, or through listening to contemporary music. Psychical escape is also possible through substance misuse.

Desire of the post-industrial subject to negate its conditions of existence is played out in the first chapter of *Stony Cross*. Tommy and Jamie are standing behind the Orange Lodge smoking cannabis. I have argued that my chronic use of drugs fuelled my misrecognition because it enabled me to negate my conditions of existence, as well as to act in the role of an Ideal-I. Substance misuse fuels the misrecognition of Jamie from the beginning of *Stony Cross*. His desire to negate is apparent in his impatience to get the joint and to get stoned. His desire to negate his conditions of existence, a desire acculturated by his post-industrial surroundings, is already becoming intertwined with and reinforced by his desire to escape into the tranquilised bubble of cannabis. The libidinal dynamism that is already strong due to his fragmented surroundings is being further enhanced as it hitches onto his desire to get stoned.

The desire to negate is also reinforced by the action of smoking an illegal substance. Negation becomes a denial of the external powers that control. Jamie is hiding behind the Orange Lodge, doing something his mother and uncle would abhor, outside of their control or that of the law. He is carving out a territory that is his own, that is separate, an area in which the rule of the patriarchy does not apply. The territory is therefore under his control. Within it, he is an agent. The practise of smoking illegal drugs also makes him an individual. It could bring him to the attention of the courts. He would be marked out from the crowd, fingerprinted and photographed to prove his individuality. He would gain a criminal record, which means he would become officially labelled as a criminal, an outlaw, an individual. Cannabis use reinforces the image of an Ideal-I as a man who walks alone, who does not walk in step with everyone else, who faces the police and the consequences of breaking the law.

The desire for this version of an Ideal-I is what motivates Tommy and Jamie when they've smoked the joint and begin to vie with each other for dominance. Battle commences when Tommy criticises what Jamie is learning at school. 'What use is that to us?' he asks. Jamie retorts by telling Tommy that 'the themes are universal,' meaning the lessons of history can be applied to our lives today. Within the phrase is a superiority that he knows more than Tommy about these matters.

However, Tommy senses that the phrase is a direct quote from the teacher whom they call 'Hitler'. When he points this out, he is trying to undermine Jamie's position as an individual man with agency because he is demonstrating that Jamie's speech is not his own, it is the mediated words of another. And not just any other, but that of the teacher. Jamie is not a heroic individual, he is a lickspittle. Tommy illustrates his point with an image related to ventriloquism. 'Sounds like the old fucker's got his hand up your arse right now,' he says as his mocking becomes even more cutting. Then he changes the figurative penetration to a literal description of sodomy. Jamie is now definitely not a man. He is a proxy woman.

Jamie's defence against this attack is to raise the stakes. He turns the suggestion of sodomy into one where Tommy's mother is the person being raped by the teacher. An insult like this would feel like an attack to Jamie, but it doesn't faze Tommy. He says that his mammy 'would probably enjoy it' thereby turning the insult into a celebration of his mother's sensuality. He also makes Jamie's mother's moral fortitude seem like emotional frigidity. Jamie is defeated by this turn. He retreats to

the safe position as moral arbiter, from where he launches another attack for the position of top dog. He asks Tommy how his life is as an unemployed youth, and makes a joke about Tommy being a 'world class masturbator'. Tommy replies by attempting to punch Jamie. But Jamie dodges out of the way and calls him a 'wanker'. The whole interchange is boys having fun, playing at getting one over on each other. But it is also representing their very real urges to become the Ideal-I image of the 'tough guy' who becomes an individual agent through a physical domination of his environment.

In order to explain this phenomenon I will digress into the past. The heritage of towns like Stony Cross rests on the physical labour of men. For decades, the personal strength and physical skill of a man was the medium through which he earned his wages. Before the National Health Service, social security was meagre and difficult to get. Historically, a man didn't just need to be strong, he needed to be fit and always capable of working. A strong and fit man could bring a steady income into a household. He was a good choice of mate for the women of the town. 'A catch.' Physical strength is, then, not just a way of earning money; it is imbued with sexual worth. Strength and physical prowess are what make a man a man.

The Ideal-I of the men of Stony Cross is a strong man who can display his strength through the medium of fighting. The muscled miners are now unemployed, drinking, smoking and watching daytime television. Their bodies are slack with disuse. They are becoming decrepit. Like Andrew, they limp and find it difficult to breathe. Their anxiety about motor impotence makes the Ideal-I of the tough and strong street-fighter even more important. They watch boxing on the television and imagine themselves in the ring, ducking and diving and landing a good right cross on the opponent's chin. Or they watch football and imagine themselves in the crucible, part of a team of men who must attack and defeat another team of men. For the duration of the bout or the game, the viewer identifies with the sportsmen. They are the sportsmen.

But, at some point, they return to their physical reality. In this return, the physical perfection of the sportsmen makes the viewer's bodies seem even more impotent. This impotence increases their desire for the ideal, an ideal that can never be realised. It is instead, worked through in an increase in substance misuse, an increased fantasy existence, and the occasional brawl in the car park of the miner's institute.

Many of the men of *Stony Cross* are unemployed. They live in poverty. They are hungry for decent food and the products of capitalism. They live in a constant whirl of unsatisfied desire, a condition that makes it clear to them they are bodies separated from their surroundings, individuals. Their separation from the other is accented because their unsatisfied desire makes it seem as if they are in conflict with their surroundings, battling with the other for shrinking resources. In these circumstances, they become so acculturated to the use of violence that it is often casual and not thought through. It is a primary and almost unconscious tool in negotiations. (See the fight between Jamie and Plunk in Chapter Ten, and also the violence between Tommy and Duncan in Chapter Six. See also how Sugar uses violence.) Violence is not an end in itself. It is instrumental.

The act of violence is physical. This physically separates the actor from the other and in this separateness supports the violent actor in his belief that he is an individual. The act of violence individualises the actor in another way. It deludes the actor into thinking he is in control, he is an agent, he is an individual. In doing this, the act of violence helps the actor to negate his conditions of existence. To illustrate this point I will return to the character of Plunk in Chapter Ten of *Stony Cross*. When he focuses his attention upon Jamie, he can negate his own conditions of existence, his own position as a victim of societal and domestic violence. He can puff himself up and become a man who is in control of a situation. A man who is an agent. The physical nature of violence lends itself to this illusion. The violent are aware of themselves as individual bodies. They are in conflict with the other. They are separate not only physically, but their separateness increases with their anger and hatred of each other. (Think of how separate Tommy is from Duncan in the moment of violence in the car. They are brothers and psychically intertwined, yet for a few seconds they are opposing physical beings.) The violence in the culture of the industrial societies serves ideology in its quest to individualise. The practise of fighting and the release it gives them from their everyday cares, a focus for their generalised anger and anxiety, is addictive and fuels their belief that they are individuals with agency.

However, the after-effects of violence, the cuts and bruises, make the actor of violence more aware of the fact of their materiality, more conscious of their bodily fragmentation. People who are more aware of their fragmentation are, as I have argued in the chapter about my drug addiction, more desirous of solidity. This desire makes them easier to interpellate, easier to recruit with promises of agency, choice



and individuality. The hailing can therefore lose its sophistication, become brash and aggressive, assuming forms that are easily filtered and rejected by the educated and privileged. Interpellation would still occur even when it was mediated through premises that were blatantly false, dragging the subject into an unsatisfactory circle of ideological lies that lead to frustration, anger and violence. This journey of interpellation suggests the ease with which the poor and needy are inculcated into extremist politics, fundamentalist religions, and other narratives which offer easy and certain answers to the complex dilemmas of life. These answers often include blaming the marginal for society's problems, the immigrant, the Jew, women, the Catholic.

The individualist ideology that is reinforced through acts of physical violence is also reinforced through the symbolic and metaphoric violence of sectarianism. Sectarianism is an integral part of life in Stony Cross. The town has an Orange Lodge. It is spray painted with sectarian slogans and paramilitary acronyms. Sectarianism itself separates groups of people, but Protestant sectarianism is individualistic in its philosophy. The Protestants are not part of a communion who relies on a priest to mediate the word of God, or for guidance, or to lead them. They are individuals who can find their own answers.

Chapter one begins behind the Orange Lodge, but it goes on to spectate on one of the biggest examples of sectarianism in Scotland, the football match between Celtic and Rangers. They are preparing themselves for a trip to Glasgow to see Glasgow Rangers play Celtic, a football game that is, as Andrew points out in Chapter 3, embedded with sectarianism. Sectarianism itself can be analysed in terms of desire and anxiety. Anxiety lies in the fear of engulfment by the quick breeding Catholics. Anxiety lies in fear of the priesthood and the history of lies a desire for an Ideal-I of the protestant warrior who defends his community against the dictatorship of Catholicism. This Ideal-I is embodied by paramilitary terrorists and Orangemen. Characters in Stony Cross who embody this Ideal-I are Sugar the UVF commander, and Billy McKinley, the birth father of the protagonist. Both of these characters are role models for Jamie. I will deal with them later in the essay.

This could be augmented with a short riff on smoking. Prevalent in poorer communities. The fix of Lacan, the stilling of desire at the moment of its satisfaction, the fixing of an image of coolness, of a person older, more wise, more sophisticated. A person who can pause to think, who just doesn't act. A person whose physical need for nicotine is fuelling the human need for fixidity, for control, and whose physical

need is destroying the physical capabilities of a person whose most valuable asset is in their physical body, making them more anxious and wanting the image of control that they get in the haze of the cigarette smoke.

This localised cultural Ideal-I of the male who is quick with his fists is reinforced by the music Jamie listens to. There are references in the novel to Oasis, (Chapters 6, 10, 30, 33) a band whose central partnership was between two warring brothers Noel and Liam Gallagher. They portrayed themselves as young men from a tough council estate who were good with their fists and uncontrollable by others. They have fought their way from the bottom of society to the top. Their fame as pop stars is inextricable linked with their public (Lester, 1996) and fraternal (McCormick, 2009) brawling. The fact that they are rich and have access to beautiful women, expensive drugs and a glamorous lifestyle means that the Gallagher brothers and their hedonistic individuality represent an Ideal-I for boys from towns like Stony Cross.

The Ideal-I offered by the music and personas of the members of Oasis is also offered in the black urban music that Jamie listens to. Men like Dr Dre, Tupac Shakur et al, offer an image of manhood that is remarkably similar to that offered in the cultural spirit of towns like Stony Cross. (Except the rappers say they like to fight with guns whilst the Scottish street gang's weapon of choice is the knife.) 'What's up with all that shit you're talking? . . . Who is the man with a masterplan? A nigga with a motherfucking gun.' (Dr Dre, 1992.) 'Wu-Tang clan ain't nothing ta fuck wit'. (Wu-tang Clan, 1993)

Hip Hop music tends to idealise men who are strong, good at fighting, and who dominate women. (Lusane, 1993) They are protagonists, heroes. They make things happen. They portray themselves as sexually successful. Their control of their environment is represented by an extremely conspicuous consumption that displays the extent of their power and influence. They move through the deprivations of the ghetto, representing themselves as dealing drugs and shooting each other, out of step with the law and authority. They give their listeners identification with a protagonist who is fighting against the odds. (White, 2011) One man against the world and the system that structures it. Their agency and power are displayed by the fact that they have transcended the ghetto. In common with the Gallagher brothers, they have cultural determinants that should have turned them into poverty stricken adults scraping by on the minimum wage. However, they have struggled. And using the



force of their individual talent, they now stand, like men, on the top of the heap. They are an example to the poor boys of towns like Stony Cross.

How music embeds and structures the image of the Ideal-I within the consciousness of Jamie is illustrated in Chapter 2 of *Stony Cross*. Jamie asks Fiona to help him with his homework. This is an excuse to get her into his bedroom where they can smoke hash and make out. As soon as they are alone they smoke a joint. Fiona puts on a De la Soul tape. At this moment Jamie is a subject of different ideological narratives that are combining within him to give him an illusion of agency whilst also manipulating his desire for that agency so that it becomes stronger. Within the sexual practise there is an image of an Ideal-I who is man enough to take control of a woman. He feels like he is doing exactly what he wants to do. However, he is not in control of her or of himself. His desire is controlling him, he is rushing towards an image of an Ideal-I who possesses/fucks a woman, but this rushing is what leads him into subjection because it brings him into her control. She is actually in control of the sexual encounter. She initiated it, and it is she who decides how far it will progress.

Cannabis augments Jamie's sexual experience, making it seem sexier, making him more easily aroused and aware of his physicality. Cannabis thus enhances his feeling of agency, whilst at once, as we learned earlier, subjecting Jamie to his need for its effects. It is cannabis that is fuelling his objectification of her body because cannabis helps to focus his awareness on the beauty of her eyes. His power as a male agent who is taking control of her body is, then, partly an effect of a substance he is a subject of.

Pleasure is also enhanced by the music, which itself has a sexual beat. As I suggested earlier, the ideology of the tough men from the African-American ghetto is already informing Jamie's Ideal-I of the man being an agent within the sexual sphere, whilst at once subjecting him to the ideology of male agency. This ideology attaches to the pleasure so that Jamie's desire for the pleasure of sex becomes attached to his desire for the Ideal-I promoted by the ideology. Jamie is becoming embroiled in a loop of desiring agency that is at once subjecting him.

To recap, the industrial background of Stony Cross contributes to a subjectivity that desires an Ideal-I figure which embodies physical strength and agency. This desire is reinforced by the fragmentation the town is going through in the process of regeneration. Jamie, as an individual constructed within this ideological matrix, is positioned to desire an Ideal-I that embodies/portrays virtues of physical

strength, emotional toughness, and sexual potency. From the beginning of the novel, Jamie's individual practice, his use of substances, the music he listens to, and his sexual relationship, combine to enhance his desire for an Ideal-I, whilst at once increasing his subjection to practices and ideologies that give an illusion of strength and agency.

## Chapter Four

I argued that my ideological positioning was wrought through the environment in which I was raised, and focused on me through the body of my father. This positioning is also happening to Jamie MacGregor because he is constituted by a landscape very similar to my own. He doesn't have a father in the same sense that I did, a man who has been with me all of my life. However, there are two men in particular who exert great influence on Jamie, his uncle Andrew and his birth father, Billy McKinley. In this chapter I will suggest that they both have a powerful libidinal dynamism which is revealed by their desire for an Ideal-I figure who is an individual agent. This desire is embedded within the ideology they focus upon and pass to Jamie MacGregor.

Andrew is the most important adult male in Jamie's life at the beginning of *Stony Cross*. He imparts advice from his fireside, advice that is accompanied by painful drags on a cigarette. He criticises the people and society around him. Even though he is a socialist who opposes the forces of individualism, he embodies the ideology of the individual through his anxiety and desire for a disinterested observer. Left wing political groups, ironically enough considering the Marxist ideology of the commune, position their members as observers outside the mass of people who consume and exploit, observers who share a special knowledge about the structure of society. These observers are physical individuals because of that position of isolation. They are also individuals in the sense that they believe in their own agency. This belief comes from the idea that they have knowledge of ideology. They can see through Capitalist propaganda, and therefore make informed choices. In effect they have been interpellated by ideology to believe that they are free individuals with agency.

Andrew is a man with a strong libidinal dynamism that is evidenced by the strength of his opinions, and the bitterness with which he expresses them. He is forceful in his denouncement of sectarianism in Chapter 3. His argument is only partly laid out with disinterested reason. It is mainly expressed in terms that are emotional and violent, and accompanied with violent actions like his poking the fire and pointing burnt matches at Jamie. He has a long and involved argument about the Labour party in Chapter 10, an argument that becomes personal and results in the

revelation of Jamie's birth mother. This argument is also accompanied by actions that could be interpreted as aggressive or violent. He denounces members of the Orange Lodge in Chapter 33, a denouncement that could cause deep insult to the people who are trying to help Jamie. It is obvious in this passage that he finds it difficult to let the argument pass, even though his vocalisation of it is interfering with the narrative of help that his interlocutors are offering Jamie.

The strength of Andrew's opinions signals a level of avoidance. He negates the real conditions of his own existence through focusing on the lives of others. He also negates through reaching for an Ideal-I figure who is authoritative, who is a perfect critic of politics, sectarianism and family values. He is, in fact, coming from a similar place as the fragmented drug addict, or the fragmented unemployed worker. Andrew's desire to escape, a desire that is already quite powerful due to the cultural determinants of the physical environment of Stony Cross, is enhanced by his pulmonary illness. This brings a sense of fragmentation. His lungs are breaking down. His need to sit on a wheelchair to travel to the miner's institute shows that he doesn't, in a sense, have legs. The fact he is wheelchair bound also suggests a 'motor impotence' and 'nursling dependency', conditions the infant of Lacan is trying to escape in its leaning towards the mirror.

Andrew's libidinal dynamism is constituted by his environment and also by a life of physical labour. He has had the drive to attack the ground to draw from it resources, to fight to gain better working conditions for himself and his peers, and who to struggle against industrial disease and deprivation. His industrial disease, and the cigarettes that exacerbate it, are powerful drivers for Andrew's dynamism. Smoking hurts him, makes him cough. It makes it hard for him to breath, to walk. It is crippling him, eating at his body. It could dismember him in the future due to the cut down of his circulation and a need to amputate fingers and toes. But it is also giving him a moment of peace in the turmoil of his life. A moment of stillness where his desires feel like they have been sated, where he can occupy the reflection the advertisers have offered him, that of the lonesome cowboy smoking a cigarette in the desert, or the cool man offering a cigarette to an attractive lady, or to the hardworking Scottish tough guy who smokes between drinks of his heavy ale.

Although enslaved by a powerfully addictive drug, as he lifts his cigarette he feels he is doing what his body is telling him to do. He is doing what he wants to do. Despite all the advice of the doctors and the health workers and contrary to all the

warnings on the sides of the packets, Andrew is doing not what the other wants him to do. Andrew is doing what Andrew wants to do. They are not in control. He is. He is an agent. He is an individual. His sense of individuality is enhanced by the bodily addiction. The bodily need is fuelling the ideological imperative. And all the time the cigarettes are fragmenting him, making him more anxious about the life he is leading, the failing of his health, the wasting of his body. This fragmentation cranks up his desire for the agency, wholeness and control that the cigarettes offer him. He is caught in a spiral of anxiety and desire that cranks up his libidinal dynamism.

The ideology passing through Andrew and into Jamie is partly counteracted by Esther. The novel introduces her in chapter 2. She is a capable and decent woman whose nurture is a buffer between Jamie and the negativity of Stony Cross. She offers a different Ideal-I, one which connects Jamie to the solidity of the earth through home cooking, the pen filled with chickens that she asks him to feed, and that she is willing to kill to provide meat for a Sunday roast. Esther engages Jamie with the real conditions of his existence in a way that recognises there is more to preparing food than peeling back a wrapper and turning on the microwave. The picking of blackberries in chapter 2 teaches that what Jamie eats is interconnected with the turning of the seasons and is controlled by nature, not him.

However, in chapter 4 of *Stony Cross*, Jamie learns that she is dying and that she will not live for more than a few weeks. By the end of chapter 8 he discovers that she is not his mother. She is his grandmother and his sister Suzanne is actually his mother. Jamie's world becomes wracked with uncertainty. His parentage, the thing that anchors him within the flows of negative ideological narrative, has been sheared, is disintegrating. The authority of Esther is also undermined, because Jamie feels that he has been lied to by her, and by the rest of his family. Their words do not have the same effect they once had. He is isolated, alienated. His isolation is not uncommon in fifteen-year-old boys. It is an age where they are assaulted by hormonal changes that make them feel fragmented and alienated. They all have a tendency to reach for positions that offer them stability and which also confirm that sense of alienation. Teenagers living in the conditions of deprivation and uncertainty of a town like Stony Cross reach even harder for stability. The uncertainty and alienation suffered by Jamie is worse even than that. His mother is dying and dies. He is grieving, and like anyone in pain, will seek to negate that pain by avoiding his conditions of existence. His genetic heritage, a thing most of us take for granted, is now uncertain, an

uncertainty that is deeply emotional and confusing. Jamie's feelings are compounded by an alienation from his family. He is no longer a familiar knot within the pattern of his family. He is a stranger. He is, in a very real sense, an isolated individual and therefore vulnerable to the effects of ideology.

When she dies, Jamie moves in with Andrew. The influence of his uncle changes from being a person he visits for a few hours every week to that of a man whom he sees everyday. Althusser says that as 'we constantly practise the rituals of ideological recognition' (1977, p. 161) we are continually subjecting ourselves to the workings of ideology. The libidinal dynamism of Andrew is in physical proximity to Jamie, being passed with every cup of tea, every meal they have, every conversation over the television programmes they watch, every walk to the Miner's Institute. And as that ideological positioning is strengthened through the close proximity of the body of Andrew, Jamie is himself a fragmented and isolated child, cut adrift from the family ties that bound him to ideology that is healthier and less of an individualistic burden, more vulnerable to the ideology that operates through Andrew.

The powerful ideological positioning wrought through Andrew is not the only thing that is focusing an enhanced libidinal dynamism upon Jamie. In the first few weeks after his mother dies, Jamie also comes under the influence of Billy McKinley, the man he later learns is his father. In their first interaction in chapter 10 it is obvious they have built up a relationship in the space between *Autumn* and *Winter*, and that Jamie respects Billy, a man who embodies the Ideal-I characteristics of a protestant town like Stony Cross. He is physically strong. He can fight. He is intelligent. He is a self-employed electrical engineer who earns a good living. He has a relationship with leisure that sees it as a reward for the work he does. He believes he should take care of his responsibilities. He believes that some of the problems of contemporary British society can be laid at the door of the welfare state and the way it enables people to live without attempting to work. Yet he also believes in helping members of the community who cannot help themselves. He thinks he is better than a Catholic because he is not a slave to the priesthood. He is an agent of his own destiny who thinks he is in control of himself.

An example of Billy's attitude to self-discipline is found in Chapter 11 of *Stony Cross*. After a Saturday morning jog that is part of Jamie's training as a boxer, Billy takes him to the Orange Lodge. He shares some of the history of the self-discipline and sacrifice of the Ulster Orangemen who died at the battle of the Somme.



(The implication being that compared to these forbears of Billy's any sacrifice asked of him is nothing to complain about.) Then he shows Jamie the caring side of the Lodge. They buy some groceries and deliver them to an old man. They help with some housework. Billy cooks a hot meal. Whilst they work, that afternoon's Rangers football game is broadcast on the radio. Jamie asks Billy if he wouldn't rather be at the stadium. Billy says that of course he would. But, 'the time for rest is when the chores are done,' he says as part of a lecture about self-discipline. Billy's work time and his leisure time are self-directed. Unlike the Papists, he is not part of the undisciplined mass that needs to be controlled by outside agents. He is an individual agent who can control his urges.

The trouble is that Billy cannot control his urges. He fathered Jamie to a woman who was fifteen at the moment of conception. His strong moral code was broken because he was married at the time, and his extra-marital intercourse was with someone who was under the age of consent. This shows that his sexual desire could not be kept under the control he thinks he exerts over himself. He could not discipline himself. Billy's lack of control is embodied in Jamie, a consequence of his lack of control.

This lack of control may cause anxiety that propels him towards the Ideal-I. He paints the church, he helps Andrew with his wheelchair, he loads up a van with football strips and drives it Belfast to help a Boys Brigade. (Chapter 15) And in Belfast, he strays once more into an inappropriate sexual encounter, this time with Hannah, the mother of the twins. Afterwards he again assumes the identity of the Ideal-I protestant, this time cloaked in the regalia of the Orange Lodge as he gives a speech to his co-religionists in Belfast. This suggests that Billy is caught in a loop of desire and anxiety that, like my relationship with heroin, Andrew's with cigarettes, and Jamie's with hashish, is self-perpetuating and progressive.

The libidinal dynamisms of Billy and Andrew will work to focus the ideology of individual agency upon Jamie, just as I was constituted by ideology that was focused through the body of my father. Jamie will grow to have a similar dynamism as I have. Jamie will be subjected to the same desire to negate his conditions of existence through substance misuse and fantasy.

## Chapter Five

Before I analyse Jamie's relationship with fantasy I would like to explore a fictional representation of a character with a powerful desire for agency, a character constituted by a similar ideological matrix as me and Jamie MacGregor. Jock McLeish is the protagonist of Alasdair Gray's novel *1982, Janine*. (Gray, 1984) This novel has influenced all of my fiction, especially in relation to the fantasy lives of my characters. In this chapter I will explore some connections between *1982, Janine* and *Stony Cross*; the cultural context, substance misuse, a strong paternal figure, and a protagonist who structures his life through fantasy. I will go on to suggest that *1982, Janine* offers a critique of the ideology of the individual agent.

Like my father and like Billy in *Stony Cross*, Jock McLeish is an electrical engineer with the status of a highly-skilled blue-collar protestant. He would be considered a success in the mining town where he was brought up. The fact that Jock has a powerful libidinal dynamism is suggested by the ambition that pushed him from the industrial landscape and away from the same employment as his father in the local colliery. However, this dynamism brings him to a crisis that could be approximated to my own. In the moment of the novel, Jock is middle-aged, a substance misuser who has become an alcoholic. He is spending the night in a hotel, inebriating himself with whisky and fantasising about a woman called Janine. She is not a real person, but someone he has constructed, based on a picture of Jane Russell he owned when he was a child. The fantasy is very elaborate. Its main theme is in the control of women through sexualised violence. Interspersed with the fantasy are Jock's pronouncements on politics, nationalism, and the state of the economy, pronouncements that suggest a character with strong opinions, itself a signal for a powerful libidinal dynamism. Slowly, the narrative gives us details of Jock's past, the toughness of life in a mining town, the abandonment of his mother, a strong paternal influence in the guise of a sadistic schoolteacher who is Jock's putative father, a desire to negate his conditions of existence through escaping into books, substance misuse and fantasy.

The power of Jock's libidinal dynamism is illustrated by his relationship with a school teacher named Hislop, a man whose drive to control his pupils is a symptom of a similarly powerful dynamism. Jock bears a 'resemblance' (p. 73) to Hislop in a passage which hints that Hislop may indeed be his father. Hislop brutalises his pupils



whilst at once having a reputation for motivating them out of the slums of the mining communities towards an education at university and a life amongst the professional classes. He asks his pupils difficult, almost impossible questions then belts them when they do not know the answer. Their desire to escape the slum is stoked by the anxiety of punishment and humiliation. He hails Jock, whose position as a subject is proven when he responds, just like the subject of Althusser is positioned by the hailing of a policeman. Jock is made to walk to the front of the class where he is beaten. He then becomes a subject recruited as an example of the power of the teacher, power that is available through education and subjection to the law of the father.

The beatings are so severe that Jock and most of the other boys cry when they are hit. Their tears are met with humiliating comments from the teacher. Eventually Jock takes his belting and remains in control of himself. He does not cry. At this point he could have returned to his desk. He could have sat down and showed his friends his red hands and been pleased at their reaction to his manliness. But that wasn't enough for him. The libidinal dynamism for the Ideal-I figure is so strong within Jock, a libidinal dynamism stoked by the teacher himself, that Jock leans towards the teacher, just as the image of control induces the infant to lean towards the mirror. He asks the teacher for more. (p. 75)

Hislop confirms Jock's vision of himself by telling him 'there is a spark of manhood' (p. 75) in him. In this manhood Jock has been given a glimpse of his future as a man, a responsible adult who will not turn from his purpose because of external factors like fear of violence. Jock is now an individual, yet his individuality comes at the price of his subjection to the ideology that says men don't cry, men are tough, men don't feel pain, men can handle violence. Jock is subjected to the idea that men are agents of their own destiny, they are individual agents.

Jock's relationship with his teacher, like mine with my father, and Jamie's with Billy and Andrew, has focused the ideology of individual agency upon him. Afterwards he chases the illusion of individual agency with vigour. He sits an exam and does so well he is offered a place at college in Glasgow. He becomes a successful electrical engineer. As I suggested in the analysis of my father, this career puts him in control of modern technology, satisfying the libidinal dynamism that is driving him towards the illusion of individual agency, an illusion that is suggested in a statement where he says he is 'the only essential man in the National team, all the others can be easily replaced.' (p. 93)

I have argued that my own libidinal dynamism propelled me into substance misuse, and that substance misuse caused me to focus increasingly upon the Ideal-I offered to me by drugs, causing my misrecognition of myself as an individual agent to become, over time, increasingly wayward, increasingly fantastic. This progression can also be charted in the life of Jock McLeish. As he gets older he negates his conditions of existence through hiding in his work, a practise that supports his illusion of agency. He also negates by anaesthetising himself with increasing quantities of alcohol. He states at the beginning of 1982, *Janine* that he is 'certainly alcoholic, but not a drunkard . . . [his] . . . self-control is perfect'. ( p. 2) The alcoholic is someone who is not in control of his consumption of alcohol, yet Jock is denying this condition of his existence by stating that he is in control. The denial of Jock suggests that he has constructed a version of himself who is in control, a version who has misrecognised his own agency.

This version of himself is manifested most strongly in the novel through the fantasies he relates. The fantasy is structured in such a way that Jock can bring a beautiful young woman called Janine into his control. The fantasy is very complex. It has developed from the simple masturbatory fantasies of a teenager into an internal existence that Jock becomes increasingly involved with. The fantasy is interwoven with his use of alcohol, both of which are methods used by Jock to relax after work. Jock's fantasy existence and his substance misuse fuel each other. Just as the sexual nature of the fantasy pulls the bodily desire of the man into the narrative momentum of the fantasy, so the need for the addictive substance (alcohol) is also drawn into the momentum of the fantasy. The fantasy, as I suggested above, is also satisfying the ideological imperative of being an individual agent. All of these desires operate and are satisfied within the narrative of the fantasy, circling in a loop of desire and anxiety that become progressively worse and self-perpetuating. The crisis this leads to, which in my case was heroin addiction, and in Jamie's case was a leg broken at the hands of Ulster paramilitaries, is, in Jock's case, an attempt at suicide halfway through the novel. (p. 163)

After this attempt, and a crisis represented in altered typeface by a skilled figurative artist, the story moves away from the fantasy of Janine and becomes a recounting of the life story of Jock. This part of the narrative becomes redemptive, the reader's sympathy manipulated by the apparent honesty, the owning of personal wrongs, and a show of repentance. By the end of the story, Jock decides that he will

no longer 'squander' (p. 330) himself in fantasy. From the end of the novel he will try and peel back his ideological layering, find the true man he is underneath it, and act like that man should.

The promise of his ability to lift himself out of ideology is reinforced by his recounting of a heroic act from when he was at school. Hislop beat one of the weaker boys again and again because the boy could not properly pronounce his name. After watching for a while not knowing what to do, Jock intervened. Hislop threatened him, but Jock would not back down. He led the class into a chant against the teacher, 'you shouldnae have done that, you shouldnae have done that.' (p. 326) Hislop suffered a collapse at the rebellion. He fell to the floor and regressed to a small boy asking bigger boys to leave him alone. This regression shows the cycle of violence, the determinant nature of it, the way it exists within working class communities and is passed down like genetic defects. Jock's intervention shows that it is possible to break the chain of physical violence, it is possible for someone to rise above their determining factors, to be an individual agent of change.

However, Gray does not depict Jock becoming this individual agent of change. The end of the novel is a knock at his hotel room door. It is the landlady. She tells him that breakfast is ready. 'All right,' (p. 331) is Jock's answer, and the final words of the novel. The all right could mean that he will restore his battered self and go to work and when his boss asks him how he is, again he will say, 'all right'. And tomorrow and the day after he will continue with his fantasies of Janine, every night having these crises, until eventually he will die in a hotel room of a heart attack, or cirrhosis, or by his own hand.

Gray is not following the ideology of the individual because Jock does not actually rise from the ashes of his life and change into a great man. Jock, we have been told, is a conservative. Gray undermines the self-confident attitudes towards being an individual agent of change by laying out a narrative that shows how much of a subject Jock is, how determined his fantasies and actions actually are. Gray is not simply passing on the ideology of individual agency, he is actually offering a critique.

*1982, Janine* is, then, a critique of the ideology of individual agency. The fantasy narrative within the novel is an illustration of how ideology manifests in the consciousness, how it creates and buttresses the sense of control ideology makes us believe we have in our lives. A man who is out of control, who is determined by his circumstances, constructs a fantasy where he is in control, where he is an agent. He is

mainly the director of the fantasy.<sup>5</sup> What it is important to note here is that Jock plays himself in the fantasy. He either directs or acts, but he is always himself. In the mirror of ideology Jock does not see a better self, a different self. It is always himself, a direct representation that is seemingly unaltered by the mirror, that is unaffected by ideology, that is a recognition rather than a misrecognition. The fantasy of Jock offers an insufficient critique of what ideology does to the subject because ideology does not actually offer an image, it offers what Lacan says the infant sees in the mirror, a mirage.

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<sup>5</sup> He does actually appear in the fantasy for a brief moment. The women have been teased into an out of control frenzy. They are desperate for a man to enter them. Jock moves from his position of director to that of actor. He fucks the women, imagining them in turn as they morph into each other. (p. 45)

## Chapter Six

This chapter will connect the ongoing argument considering Jamie MacGregor's libidinal dynamism to his relationship with the fantasy character Jimmy Mac and explore the implications of this relationship to the theory of ideology as critiqued by Alasdair Gray. It will suggest that an increase in Jamie's desire for agency is mediated through practises like boxing and masturbation. The desire for the Ideal-I figure is focused through role models like Billy McKinley, the twins, and Sugar. When Jamie's desire increases, Jimmy Mac begins to inform his actions, resulting in a spiral of anxiety and desire that lead Jamie towards subjection. This will suggest that *Stony Cross* and this essay are a contribution to human knowledge, not simply as an illustration of how ideology embeds itself and leads the individual to an illusory agency, but as a development of Gray's critique that incorporates Lacan's Mirror Stage into the illustration of ideological interpellation.

Jamie MacGregor's desire for the Ideal-I figure of the 'tough-guy' individual agent is 'always-already' (Althusser, 1977, p. 64) present within him as a culturally constructed subject of the ideological narratives of *Stony Cross*. This desire manifests as a conscious psychical phenomenon in the form of a fantasy figure when his capabilities as a man are called into question at the beginning of Chapter 10. Jamie is waiting in the queue of the chip shop. A younger boy called Plunk cuts in front, but Jamie pushes him back out. Plunk then states, in an unemotional and therefore frightening way, that he is prepared to settle their dispute with fists. Plunk is the embodiment of the ideology of the 'tough guy'. He draws his finger across his throat as he leaves the shop, erasing any doubt over his seriousness. As Jamie orders his lunch, he thinks of the conflict and its consequences. He steps outside expecting to be confronted by Plunk, but he is relieved to encounter Fiona and her friend Morag. They eat together and the girls say he shouldn't worry, that they will walk with him back to school. Plunk waits on the road, but is challenged and faced down by Morag. Plunk decides to retreat, but tells Jamie he is 'hiding behind a woman's skirt'. This statement says that Jamie is not capable of standing on his own as a man because he is still attached to the breast. His 'motor impotence' is made manifest by his 'nursling dependency'. (Lacan, 2002, p. 4) Later in the afternoon, Plunk attacks Jamie in the

school toilets. Jamie's motor impotence is again manifested when he doesn't fight back.

In the aftermath of the assault, Jamie negates his real conditions of existence through a fantastical recreation. He does not simply imagine himself in this battle. The mirror of ideology offers an Ideal-I figure called Jimmy Mac, a man who is a more skilled representation of Jamie, a self he thinks he could be with the correct training. Jimmy Mac is, however, more than a developed Jamie. He is, as Lacan argues about the image the infant sees in the mirror, 'the maturation of his power in a *mirage*.'<sup>6</sup> (Lacan, 2002, p. 4) This mirage is constituted from that Jamie is and can be, a reflected image of himself, and also an illusory sense of self, one that is offered by ideology, one that is an internalisation of the other, and is therefore what he is not, nor can ever be.

The idea that Jimmy Mac is 'Jamie' and is 'not-Jamie' can be discerned from an analysis of the name and its relationship to Jamie and his cultural context. In Scotland, Jimmy is a pet name for James. In Jamie's immediate cultural area, that of the West of Scotland and Glasgow, Jimmy is the usual way that James is represented. The Mac is a shortened version of MacGregor. The name Jimmy Mac could easily be a developed version of Jamie MacGregor that came about through the word games that children play when they address each other and eventually settle on nicknames.

Jimmy is also a maturation of Jamie because Jamie is a pet name for James, but it carries connotations of the nursery and its attendant motor impotence, whereas Jimmy is more adult, more manly, more capable. Even in the way Jamie and Jimmy sound as they are spoken carry connotations. Jamie sounds soft and gentle, as if it is coming from the mouth of a mother or a lover, whereas Jimmy sounds hard and tough like it is coming from the mouth of a man, a brother, a comrade. Jamie in this sense is connected to the hearth and the home, whereas Jimmy is connected to the brotherhood of men, to the outdoors, to the field of battle, to the pub, to the boxing ring. Widening the circle of meaning, Jimmy is working-class Scottish in a way that Jamie is not. It carries with it the culture of Scotland, and more particularly, Glasgow, 'no mean city', the shipyards, the razor gangs, the hard working men who drink and fight on a Friday night, who have a reputation throughout the United Kingdom for fearlessness and aggression.

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<sup>6</sup> My italics.



The surname prefix Mac also carries the connotations of Scotland, the native people of the Highlands, the skirl of the bagpipes, the kilts, marching through the heather towards English guns, charging those same guns with fearlessness. The toughness of people who lived in sod huts, the last tribal people of Europe, a receding culture that needs to be protected, to be fixed, to be fetishised, to become part of a national misrecognition, a national ideology. Toughness is also connoted in these images from the clans, toughness that is reinforced by the tradition of reiving where clans would maraud through the glens stealing each other's cattle, and that of the crown, risking death for the honour of becoming a reputed man of the clan. These raids signify a sense of brotherhood amongst clansmen, and also a sense of honour, for the clan and its members. These themes can already be read in Jamie's surname because the MacGregors are famous for their love of battle and reiving, but they can also be read in a more generic Scottish way in the surname Mac.

Mac also carries a connotation of the Protestant. Mac means son in Gaelic. (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2007) Son is also represented by Mc in Scottish names. (Like my own.) This version sounds like Mick, which is one of the derogatory Glaswegian terms for a Catholic, or more specifically Irish Catholic.<sup>7</sup> Some Scottish people believe the Mc version comes from Ireland whilst the Mac version comes from Scotland. I have myself been told I have Irish blood due to this misconception. Mac, therefore, sounds more native Scottish and, in its contrast with the 'Irish' and Catholic Mc, sounds more Protestant.

These connections between the name Jamie MacGregor and Jimmy Mac, make it possible for one to be taken for the other, for one to be a mirror of the other, a reflection, an image that is true, if slightly skewed. However, Jimmy Mac also represents the alienation that is inculcated within the infant when it first looks in the mirror, alienation that causes the infant to redouble its efforts to feel whole and in control, alienation that can only be assuaged with further identification with the image that is the infant and is, at once, not the infant.

Jimmy is the reflection that is Not-Jamie, because Jimmy is a Glaswegian term for the other, the man we do not know, or whose name we do not know. (Like John in London.) Jimmy is therefore a stranger, just as Jamie, the bastard child, is effectively a stranger. Jimmy is unknown by whomever would use his name. Jimmy the unknown

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<sup>7</sup> Derived from Michael, a common Irish name, just as Paddy, another nickname for a person from Ireland, is derived from Patrick, another common Irish name.

is separate from the society in which he lives. Mac is also a term for the stranger, but not in Scotland, in North America. Jimmy Mac's position as a stranger is further strengthened when we consider again the Gaelic meaning of the surname prefix, Mac. Jamie's name might be MacGregor as in son of Gregor, but the man he would be in fantasy is the son of nobody. This is related to the fact that Jamie has recently found out he is the son of an as yet unknown father. Jamie, in a sense, is a stranger to himself. Jimmy, like Jamie, is a man with no patronage, a stranger, an outsider. He is a man with no name. An individual. A man with no ties to a family, who has no determining factors, who is then, an individual agent.

All these images weave in and out of the mirage that Jamie seeks in his fantasy. Just as the infant's identification with the mirage in the mirror increases its alienation and anxiety, so Jamie's identification with the mirage of Jimmy Mac increases his. When Billy arrives at the graveside, Jamie lies to him by saying that he fought back. The lie alienates him, and also increases his anxiety. He thinks more of Jimmy Mac and his desire to be such a person. Billy offers the solution of taking Jamie to boxing. In this practise, the Ideal-I of Jimmy Mac becomes an Ideal-I that is perhaps a possibility, an anticipation of his future, a future he begins to run after. This belief is, of course, a misrecognition. The subject can never reach the mirage.

Physical training at the gym lends a material aspect to the fantasy which contributes to Jamie's fixation in the same way that physical labour contributes to the ideological construction of working-class individuals. The training increases his awareness of his body and how it is solidifying. He is becoming more of an individual with hard edges between him and the other. The training brings a perception of his body as a vulnerable vessel that is still potentially impotent, examples of which can be found in chapter 10 where he is training with the medicine ball, or in chapter 13 when he boxes with the more skilled boy. The obviousness of his vulnerability is a spur towards the Ideal-I. The training also brings awareness of his body as a sum of parts, the fists, the head, an attacking force, a defensive force. This fragmentation contributes to his desire for the whole that can only be attained by an assumption of the guise of the Ideal-I.

Jamie's fixation with the Ideal-I of Jimmy Mac is strengthened by his obsession with the pornography star called 'Flora from Minnesota', a character who is introduced to him via a film that he watches with Tommy and Duncan and whose images appear in a magazine Tommy steals from his father and gives to Jamie.



(Chapter 6) Jamie therefore has pictures of Flora that he hides under his bed and peruses at his leisure. Flora is, at least as a representation, under Jamie's control. As he masturbates during fantasies of having sex with her, he occupies the position of Jimmy Mac. The eroticisation helps to solidify the already concretised Ideal-I relationship because the sexual aspect contributes a pleasure motive in the same way that sensual pleasure contributes to the relationship the drug addict has with their Ideal-I figure. This pleasure, and satisfaction of sexual desire, means that the body of Jamie and his sexual urges are drawn into his desire for the Ideal-I, causing an upsurge in his libidinal dynamism.

Although the Ideal-I of Jimmy Mac grows in importance and becomes more desirable as Jamie interweaves it with his boxing training and his sexual drive, Jamie remains in control of it until he goes to Belfast with Billy and Tommy in chapter 15. The Scots stay with a woman called Hannah. She has twin sons, violent boys who, unbeknown to Billy, are associated with the terrorist organisation, the Ulster Volunteer Force. The twins are physically and emotionally tough. They appear to be in control of themselves and their environment. To Jamie at least, they appear as individual agents, their hard bodies and aggressive attitudes making distinct boundaries between them and the other, their behaviour signifying attitudes of non-compliance to external control. They are manifestations of the tough-guy individual agent image of Belfast, foci of ideology which speaks to them and through them, and is converged by them onto the body and mind of Jamie.

The twins offer to take Jamie and Tommy on a sightseeing tour of the city, a tour that ends with a trip to the Falls Road, a Republican area and therefore dangerous for Loyalists. Deprivation is signalled by the potholes and boarded up windows. The landscape is fragmenting like that of Stony Cross. It oozes anxiety and uncertainty and is contrasted by the slick beauty of paramilitary murals. The images offered by the murals represent the Ideal-I of paramilitary heroes like Bobby Sands, figures who offer wholeness, power and certainty from their positions within sectarian discourse. Figures who are mirages conveying film star looks and perfect teeth.<sup>8</sup>

I argued that the size of the gulf between the Ideal-I and the uncertainty of Stony Cross is proportional to the libidinal dynamism of the population of Stony

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<sup>8</sup> An excellent photograph that illustrates the contrast between the broken and uncertain landscape and the idealised beauty of the paramilitary mural can be found at: [http://www.belfast-murals.co.uk/images/uda\\_boundary.jpg](http://www.belfast-murals.co.uk/images/uda_boundary.jpg). An example of a mural of Bobby Sands can be found at: [http://www.belfast-murals.co.uk/images/bobby\\_sands.jpg](http://www.belfast-murals.co.uk/images/bobby_sands.jpg).

Cross. In Belfast the gulf is so much wider, which suggests that it works to construct subjectivities with a proportionally more powerful libidinal dynamism. Desire for the Ideal-I of Belfast is mediated through the twins and into the body of Jamie. It manifests when they incite him into vandalising the mural of Bobby Sands with a paint bomb. Jamie is afraid because he realises that if he is caught by the locals he could be seriously hurt or even killed. This anxiety of dismemberment at the hands of paramilitary justice (kneecapping) causes him to lean forward in his consciousness and occupy the position of Jimmy Mac. When he throws the paint, he is doing more than imagining he is Jimmy Mac, he actually becomes Jimmy Mac.

I got out with the bag in my hand. I already had blue paint sticking my fingers together. It was getting under my nails. I could feel my legs trembling as I stood upright. I couldn't stop thinking about it all going wrong and this shower of Catholics chasing me through the alleyways, cornering me and kicking the pure fucking shite out of me.

Eddie rolled his window down. 'Are you going to throw that thing or what?'

Jimmy Mac fills his chest with air and surveys the area. He nods at the three possible escape routes. Then he swings his shoulder and launches the missile. It curves into the air, hitting Bobby on the forehead with a big splat of blue. 'Good fucking shot,' said George.

As the paint rolls over the eyes and down the face, Jimmy notices two lads appear at the corner. One nudges the other and then turns and whistles. Within seconds a pal joins them. And then another comes out of a house. He calls and one of them points at the car. Jimmy leans against the roof and stares at them. Somebody shouts.

'Get in.'

The voice brought me back to reality. I ducked inside and expected George to drive. But he didn't. He pressed the stereo button and the sounds of a flute band filled the square. He rested back in his seat like he was the king of Ireland, or the top UVF man in Belfast. He pointed to the youths as if he had a gun in his hand. He waited until they were within stone throwing distance, then he revved the engine and let the clutch out. The car lurched forward and spun on the square before we left in the same direction we came in. (Chapter 15)

Jamie's desire to negate his conditions of existence becomes so huge as he stands by the mural that he, Jamie, no longer exists. His misrecognition is total. Jimmy is the ultimate negation because Jimmy is the stranger who is only called Jimmy because his name is unknown. Jamie has been alienated and interpellated by the strands of ideology that operate within the fields of his determinant cultures, transformed in complete identification with the Ideal-I. In this moment Jamie becomes an individual who is physically brave, who is in enough control of himself to

act even whilst under enormous pressure, yet who is a stranger to himself, an illusion. Jamie is an ideologically constructed mirage of individual agency.

This moment could be compared to the first time I used drugs and was transformed from a shy and anxious boy, into an Ideal-I man who was brave, charming and tough. It wasn't just an image of an Ideal-I that I could try and emulate. It was an actual transformation that negated who I actually was, like I was stepping into a new consciousness, identifying with a better self. Whilst under the influence, my whole consciousness was altered, anxiety disappeared, I *was* the person who I became when I took drugs, because drugs helped me find my true self. As I have already argued, drugs gave me a sense of agency because they made me feel like a hero, a protagonist in my own story. However, this transformation and the feeling of power that I got when I was transformed, made my un-stoned conditions of existence more difficult to bear. My identification with the Ideal-I had effectively ramped up my levels of anxiety. Consequently, my desire for the illusory agency of the heroic Ideal-I was increased.

After the vandalism, Jamie's anxiety is compounded by the danger he is in. He and the twins escape the scene of the vandalism, but are stopped at a roadblock by the Repressive State Apparatus in the form of the Army and the Constabulary. Jamie sees that playing with the law in Belfast is more dangerous than smoking a few joints behind the Orange Lodge in Stony Cross. The consequences far more serious.

His anxiety is reinforced by the uncontrolled dynamism of the twins. But the twins are not just causes of anxiety. They also mediate a mirage that offers a transcendence of the anxiety. After the roadblock, they put Ian Paisley accents and start shouting 'terrorists'. They laugh uncontrollably and are obviously proud of the term, and of its application to them. They have internalised the images of the murals and the Ideal-I they promote, that of the paramilitary terrorist. Their desire for these images has been mediated through the discourse of sectarianism. It is a culturally constructed subject position. Yet the twins believe they are freely rejecting the stuffiness of the Orange Lodge and making the choice to join the world of the terrorist. They believe they are agents of their own destiny. They have been interpellated and are now passing the ideology to Jamie. He might be consciously appalled by the attitudes of the twins, but he is also deeply desirous of the toughness and agency they embody.

The anxiety induced by the terror of Belfast combined with the renewed exposure to Ideal-I figures within the narratives of the twins and Sugar means that Jamie comes back from Belfast as a boy whose actions are more informed by his identification with the Ideal-I of Jimmy Mac. When he meets Fiona in chapter 16, his former tenderness and tentativeness has receded. He acts more like he thinks Jimmy Mac would, grabbing her and trying to force himself upon her. It takes him a while to notice that she does not like it, that she is disturbed by his actions. Fiona notices how Jamie has changed, he has in effect, become a stranger to her. She starts to question him about what happened in Belfast. She comes to the conclusion that Jamie has been unfaithful so breaks with him, causing him great anxiety.

Soon afterwards, Tommy leaves to work in London as a door-to-door salesman for a company controlled by Sugar and the twins. Jamie, reacting from the anxiety induced when he forces Suzanne to tell him who his father is, decides to follow Tommy. In London, he is inducted into the world of capitalism, resulting in an increase in the misrecognition of his individual agency due to the methods of selling to people on their doorsteps, methods which include taking control of the conversation and telling lies to make the customer sympathetic and pliable. Anxiety is also raised because he is a boy who has relocated from the small town he knows to the uncertainty of London. He is no longer cocooned within the care of a familiar network. He lives in close proximity with men prone to violence. The combination of illusory agency and the increased anxiety fuels his desire to misrecognise himself.

The extent of his misrecognition is revealed in the scene where he tries to deal with a disagreement with Sugar from a position that assumes they are equals who can debate with each other and let the argument be decided by logic. Jamie's misrecognition as an individual agent has progressed to the extent that he believes he can control this situation, and by extension the body of Sugar, by the force of his argument. Sugar does not recognise the Ideal-I figure of Jamie that Jamie is trying to project. Sugar sees a cheeky wee boy from Scotland, one of the self-righteous types that come to Belfast and try to portray themselves as partners of the people of the Shankill. Sugar also sees rebellion, and rebellion in front of witnesses. A man in his position cannot let young men try and treat him as someone they can reason with. He needs to keep his team under control and he does that through the medium of violence. Jamie's misrecognition is so huge he cannot see this. Everyone else in the room can. But Jamie can't.

Jamie's misrecognition causes him to be beaten up by Sugar. His misrecognition should have been crushed by the violence. But it wasn't. If anything it was reinforced, because it made his relationship with Sugar one that is mediated through violence. Only tough guys communicate with each other through violence, and as I have argued, violence individualises because it is a physical act that separates individuals. In Jamie's case, it does similar things the fight with Plunk did. He is beaten. He is fragmented, having to be moved from the room by the twins because he is unable, he is in a state of motor impotence. This causes him to reach even harder for the Ideal-I.

Jamie's misrecognition is made even worse when Sugar apologises for the violence. In the process of the apology he makes the assault a response that was reasoned and logical, an argument he forwards in the intimate setting of the kitchen, part of a conversation that is a 'man to man' description of how he has to operate. The intimacy brings Jamie into the circle of tough guys, makes him one of them. Sugar completes the indoctrination by rubbing his ribs and telling Jamie that he is a 'tough wee fucker.' (Chapter 22) Jamie is not just a boy who has been beaten up by the gangster, he is a man who has had a fight with a gangster, a fight that hurt Jamie, but also hurt the gangster. They are physical equals.

Jamie's reaction to the news that Sugar considers him to be tough is to wonder if Sugar is being sarcastic. His disbelief carries within it his desire to be the tough guy, and also his anxiety about being incapable. He wants very much to be recognised as a fellow by Sugar, and is at once deeply anxious about being considered a boy. Sugar then offers him a job helping him and twins in their drug dealing business, a position that will give Jamie the chance to be the individualistic tough guy, involved with gangsters, operating outside of the law, self-employed and earning a good wage. But it also carries huge anxiety due to the dangers of dismemberment through violence, and the possibility of police action and imprisonment.

Jamie is dragged into a loop of anxiety and desire that manifests in an increased engagement with the mirage of Jimmy Mac. This engagement informs his actions in such a way that it causes deeper anxiety. In chapter 24, he is selling household goods on the doorsteps of Fulham. A woman who is attractive and sophisticated buys an ironing board cover but tells him he must come in to fit it. She is charming in the offhand way powerful people use to make their interlocutors feel special. Jamie misinterprets this as flirting. He becomes Jimmy Mac chatting up



Flora. He reaches out and grips the woman by her dressing gown and pulls her close for a kiss. The woman doesn't react as if she has been assaulted, but she sternly tells him to behave. Then she acts as if nothing has happened whilst Jamie fits the cover, signalling the fact that she doesn't acknowledge the Ideal-I figure that Jamie is trying to project. This causes Jamie to feel great anxiety and loneliness as he leaves her house, feelings that spur his identification with Jimmy Mac. Of course this anxiety can also cause the subject to realise their recognition is faulty. But ideology is continually confirming the validity of Jamie's desire for the Ideal-I figure. In the case of the customer, ideology makes him believe that if he really were a man like Jimmy Mac, she would have let him have sex with her. Her refusal to believe his misrecognition has cranked up his desire to misrecognise himself.

In the following chapter of the novel, (25) the loop of anxiety and desire tightens when Jamie is in Soho working as part of Sugar's drug dealing gang. That evening, Jamie is made to work on his own, collecting the money raised by the twins. By late in the evening he is holding a couple of thousand pounds of Sugar's money. It is raining. He is cold, wet, lonely and scared. He reaches for the Ideal-I to negate his conditions of existence. He fantasises about beating Sugar in the boxing ring, whilst watching himself in a sex shop window, as if he was shadow boxing in the gym. Suddenly he is interrupted by two girls who laugh at him and call him 'the champ'. They do not recognise him as Jimmy Mac the great boxer and all round tough guy. They see a foolish young boy who is living in a dream. In their eyes he is laughable, a nobody, impotent. The opposite of the hero he is trying to construct.

Anxiety again consumes Jamie. He goes into the sex shop to avoid their gaze, and discovers a magazine that has pictures of Flora. This provokes another fantasy. Again, he becomes Jimmy Mac, the seducer and rescuer of Flora. Whilst looking at the magazine his pager buzzes with a message that he is to meet Sugar to hand over the proceeds of the evening's dealing. As he walks towards the meeting, he is Jimmy Mac, planning on giving Sugar a beating, then stealing the money to finance a new life for him and Flora. He is so lost in this fantasy, that he doesn't notice the danger of men who approach him in a dark street. They attack him and steal the money.

In the aftermath of this attack, Jamie is placed in a car with Sugar and his henchman. They drive around trying to find the robbers. Sugar is angry and threatening. Jamie is frightened. Sugar shoots a dealer from a rival gang. As they casually drive away from the scene, Jamie's anxiety combines with a desire to escape

his conditions of existence. He slips between himself and an involved fantasy of Jimmy Mac. Jimmy is tied up and a prisoner of Sugar. He works himself loose, and at a busy junction, manages to escape from the car and disappear into the night. From this moment, it is obvious that Jimmy has a narrative momentum of his own, one that diverges from Jamie. However, the momentum has actually been building ever since Jamie came to London. It moved from being a series of vignettes independent of each other and relevant mainly in the connection they have to the actions of Jamie, to one that is following its own internal logic. The governing force for that logic is revenge, getting back at Sugar for the attack on Jamie in chapter 21.

The revenge narrative gives an impression that the narrative of Jimmy Mac is a consequence of the narrative of Jamie. This impression is partly true, but it is also false, a misrecognition. The narrative of Jimmy Mac may have revenge at its core, but the revenge it moves towards began before the violence that precipitated it. Jimmy Mac and Flora agreed to meet in Soho (Chapter 20) before Jamie knew he would ever end up there. It is in their first conversation in Soho that Jimmy tells Flora that he plans to get revenge on Sugar. Jimmy has anticipated the violence of Sugar and is preparing for it. Jimmy Mac is, and has been since the beginning of *Winter*, an ‘anticipation of . . . [Jamie’s] . . . future’. (Lacan, 2002, p.4)

Since Jamie’s fight with Plunk he has been chasing the Ideal-I of Jimmy Mac, effectively subjected to the idea of himself as an agent, a subjection that is ‘always already’ present. (Althusser, 1977, p. 64) His desire has increased due to the agency he has tasted in the momentary identifications with Jimmy Mac. Desire is also increased by the anxiety induced by the confrontations caused by his ideal. The revenge narrative of Jimmy Mac illustrates this desire and Jamie’s subjection. Jimmy Mac’s revenge removes Jamie’s perception of himself as a victim, determined by circumstances, and replaces it with the idea that he is a perpetrator of violence, an agent. Jimmy Mac is the mirage of agency offered to the subject of ideology. The mirage is chasing Sugar as if it can defeat Sugar, as if it can subject him, as if it can take control of an out-of-control situation. Jamie feels like he is chasing the mirage and the individual agency it offers.

However, the mirage of Jimmy Mac is leading Jamie into subjection. Jamie chases the mirage until he is finally cornered in the pit yard at the heart of Stony Cross. There Sugar and his men beat him. He is hung from a tree to signify the extent of his subjection. One of the men punch him on the testicles, an act that suggests

castration, unmanning, subjection. The paramilitaries break his ankle, returning him to the infant's place of motor impotence and nursling dependency. This state of being is made clear in the final chapter where Jamie is bedridden and dependent on nurses.

The final two chapters show that the mirage of Jimmy Mac has not led Jamie towards individual agency. It has led him into a subjection that has become more constricted as he has worked harder to gain the proffered agency. Jamie's subjection reveals more than the subjection wrought according to Althusser and illustrated by Alasdair Gray in 1982, *Janine*, where the subject chases agency in the form of a mirror image of the subject who is whole and in control. Jamie's subjection reveals the Lacanian basis of Althusser's theory because his subjection was wrought through identification with a mirage that was constituted by a mirror image of agency a la Gray, and also an ideological construction based on his cultural circumstances, a construction that is not Jamie, but a misrecognised, fantastic version of Jamie that is forever unattainable.



## Conclusion

I have asserted that the novel *Stony Cross* and its accompanying critical essay contribute to human knowledge by offering an illustration of how ideology interpellates individual subjects. In order to explicate this assertion, I drew on the theory of interpellation as it was laid out by Louis Althusser in his essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).' Althusser's theory has been highly influential but has also suffered some criticism due to the lack of sophistication in its explanation of how subjects are subjected, a lack that is partly caused by the structural nature of its analysis. I acknowledge the lack of sophistication in Althusser's vision by moving away from his overarching sociological analysis towards the sections of his theory that are of interest to the development of the character of Jamie MacGregor, that of the formation of individual subjects and how ideology operates within those subjects. But, even here, Althusser lacks the necessary sophistication because his essay seems to lose sight of the part the individual plays in its subjection. In order to address this lack, I worked back from Althusser and into the theory that his essay is informed by, Jacques Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* function; as Revealed by Psychoanalytic Experience.'

Lacan argues that the infant, when it first sees its reflection in the mirror, leans towards that mirror, captivated by its own image. The image, according to Lacan, offers the infant a sense of control over its own motor functions as well as an image of itself as a discrete being separate from its surroundings and therefore an individual. The physical leaning forward is a manifestation of the infant's desire for individual agency. The image is a mirage however, an illusion. The price the infant pays for the illusion of control that the mirror offers is that it will be forever split from itself and desire whatever offers a sense of control and the wholeness of being an individual. Placing this theory back into Althusser suggests that what ideology is offering the human subject is what the mirror offered the infant, a illusory sense of individual agency. The subject leans towards that sense of agency, focusing its desire upon that sense of agency. The subject is subjected by its own desire for agency.

The implications of Lacan's essay are compelling for me because I am a recovering drug addict who has experienced intense self-examination in order to try

and work out my motivations as an abuser of substances that gave me a sense of agency and individuality, whilst leading me into subjection. This essay examined that paradox, not as an exercise in self-indulgence, but because my life as an abuser of substances has informed all of my fiction, and most especially *Stony Cross*. Theory that gives some explanation of how my subjectivity was constructed and how it is reflected in the motivations of my characters is eminently suitable for an analysis of my fiction.

Although *Stony Cross* is not exactly an autobiographical novel, it is set in a place that is a direct reflection of the place where I was constituted, an environment that contributed towards a subjectivity that had a powerful desire for individual agency, a desire that was also embedded within the body of my father and focused through him into me. The protagonist of *Stony Cross* is constituted within a similar matrix. The town of Stony Cross is a post-industrial mining area. Male characters operate as role models to the protagonist, focusing upon him their own powerful dynamisms. Jamie has a powerful desire for agency that is a direct reflection of that inculcated within me. Jamie's desire for agency leads him to a subjection that could be compared to mine. I ended up a drug addict, a dependent. Jamie ends up in hospital, dependent.

Alasdair Gray illustrates the paradox of agency and subjection in his novel *1982, Janine*. The protagonist, Jock McLeish, obviously has a great desire to do something with his life, to become an agent of his own destiny. He leans towards an ideal of control, and does take control. He escapes the mining village, goes to college, and builds a successful profession as an electrical engineer. But like myself, and like Jamie MacGregor, Jock is a subject who is captivated by substance misuse and fantasy. Jock's fantasy life becomes all consuming. His journey towards an illusion of individual agency leads him into subjection, making the novel an illustration of the ideological constitution of the individual subject.

However, the ideological illustration of *1982, Janine* lacks some of the insight that a closer reading of Lacan's Mirror Stage brings to Althusser's theory of interpellation. The subject of Althusser is not an incorporation of self and the other, and neither is the subject of Jock's fantasy. It is a direct representation of Jock. The fantasy projections of Jamie MacGregor, however, offer the insight of Lacan and in this way they develop the illustration offered by Alasdair Gray. Jamie's fantasy maps the ideological interpellation of Jamie the subject of the mirror, a subject who sees

himself as Jimmy Mac, a 'mirage' constituted by a direct reflection of Jamie, and also by images introjected from ideology.

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