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THE GUILTY ONE



REDEMPTION
ROAD

Forgiveness is the sweetest
form of revenge





Margaret Holloway
Thursday 5 December, 2013

Margaret Holloway wrapped her scarf around her face before she walked out into the school car park. It was not long after four o'clock, but a winter pall had shifted over London. It was dusk already, wary streetlamps casting premature light on to the icy pavements. Snowflakes had begun to swirl and Margaret blinked as one landed on her eyelashes. The first snow of the year always brought a silence, dampening down all sound. She felt gratefully alone, walking out into the new darkness, hers the only footprints on the path. She had been too hot inside and the cold air was welcome.

Her car was on the far side of the car park and she wasn't wearing proper shoes for the weather, although she had on her long, brown eiderdown coat. She had heard on the radio that it was to be the worst winter for fifty years.

It was only a few weeks until her thirty-sixth birthday, which always fell during the school holidays, but she had so much to do before the end of term. She was carrying a large handbag, heavy with documents to read for a meeting tomorrow. She was one of two deputy head teachers at Byron Academy, and the only





woman on the senior management team, although one of the four assistant heads below Margaret was female. The day had left her tense and electrified. Her mind was fresh popcorn in hot oil, noisy with all the things she still had to do.

She walked faster than she might have done in such wintry conditions, because she was angry.

'Don't do this,' she had just pleaded with the head teacher, Malcolm Harris.

'It's a serious breach,' Malcolm had said, leaning right back in his chair and putting two hands beside his head, as if surrendering, and showing a clear circle of sweat at each armpit. *'I know how you feel about him. I know he's one of your "projects" but—'*

'It's not that . . . it's just that permanent exclusion could ruin him. Stephen's come so far.'

'I think you'll find he's known as Trap.'

'And I don't think of him as a project,' Margaret had continued, ignoring Malcolm's remark. She was well aware of Stephen Hardy's gang affiliations – knew him better than most of the teachers. She had joined the school fresh out of college, as an English teacher, but had soon moved into the Learning Support Unit. The unit often worked with children with behavioural problems, who had to be removed from mainstream classes, and she had been shocked by the number of children who couldn't even read or write. She had taught Stephen since his first year, when she discovered that, at the age of thirteen, he still couldn't write his own address. She had tutored him for two years until he was back in normal classes and had been so proud of him when he got his GCSEs.

'He was carrying a knife in school. It's a simple case as far as I can see. He's nearly seventeen years old and—'





'It feels like you're condemning him. This is coming at the worst time – he's started his A Levels and he's making such good progress. This'll shatter his confidence.'

'We can't have knives in school.'

'He wasn't *brandishing* the knife. It was discovered by accident at the gym. You know he carries it for protection, nothing more.'

'No, I don't know that. And that's beside the point. This isn't as dramatic as you're making out. Kids drop out of sixth form all the time . . .'

'But he's not dropping out. You're forcing him out, after all he's overcome. Seven GCSEs with good grades and his teachers say his A Level work has been great. This is just a blip.'

Malcolm laughed lightly. '*A blip, hardly what I would call it.*'

Margaret swallowed her anger took a deep breath and answered very quietly. 'This decision will have a huge, huge impact on his life. Right now he has a chance and you are about to take it away. There are other options. I want you to take a step back and think very carefully.'

'One of us does need to step back . . .'

'I've said my piece. All I'm asking is that you sleep on it.'

Malcolm's hands fell into his lap. He clasped them and then raised his thumbs at the same time as he raised his eyebrows. Margaret took it as assent.

'Thank you,' she managed, before she slipped on her coat.

'Drive carefully. There's a freeze on.'

Margaret smiled at him, lips tight shut. Malcolm was young for a head teacher: early forties, a keen mountain climber. He was only seven years older than Margaret and they were friends of sorts. They didn't often have differences and he had backed her rise to the school leadership.





‘You too,’ she had said.

The conversation tossed and turned in Margaret’s mind as she walked to the car. She thought about Stephen with his violent older brother and collection of primary school swimming trophies. She thought about Malcolm and his insinuation that her viewpoint was personal, emotional.

The snow had become a blizzard and flakes swarmed. She was thirsty and tired and could feel her hair getting wet. She saw the car, took the key from her pocket and pressed the button to open the doors.

As the headlights flashed on the new snow, she slipped. She was carrying too many things and was unable to stop herself. She fell, hard.

Picking herself up, Margaret realised that she had skinned her knees. Her handbag was disembowelled and the papers for tomorrow’s meeting were dampening in the snow.

‘Jesus Christ,’ she whispered, as her knuckles grazed the tarmac chasing her iPhone.

In the car, she glanced at her face in the rear-view mirror and ran her fingernails through her dark cropped hair. She had worn her hair short since her early twenties. It accentuated her big eyes and the teardrop shape of her face. The snow had wet her lashes, and ruined the eyeliner that ran along her upper lid in a perfect cat’s eye. She ran her thumb beneath each lid. The lights from the school illuminated her face in the mirror, making her seem paler, childishly young and lost.

She turned the key in the ignition, but the engine merely whined at her.

‘You have got to be kidding,’ she said, under her breath. ‘Come on. You can do it.’

She waited ten seconds before turning the key again, blowing





on to her stinging knuckles and wondering if she might actually self-combust if she couldn't even get out of the *bloody car park*.

Often, she took the Tube to work but there was disruption today and she hadn't wanted to risk being late.

She turned the key again. The engine whined, coughed but then started.

'Thank you,' Margaret whispered, pumping the accelerator, turning on the lights and the radio.

She put on her seatbelt, turned on the heaters, exhaled, then glanced at Ben's text on her iPhone before she turned on to the road. *We need milk, but only if u get a chance xx*

The wipers were on full, the snow gathering at the corners of the windscreen.

She turned right on to Willis Street and then after the Green Man Interchange she took the first exit, signposted *Cambridge and Stansted Airport*. It was just over a half-hour drive from the school to Loughton in good conditions, but because of the snow and the heavy traffic today, Margaret expected it would take her forty minutes or more to get home.

Under her opaque tights, her skinned knees were stinging. The sensation reminded her of being a child. She banged the back of her head gently off the headrest, as if to shake the worries from her mind.

Ben would be making dinner, but as soon as she had eaten it, it would be time to take Paula to her acting class in the local community centre, where Margaret would sit drinking weak machine coffee, preparing for her meeting tomorrow. If they made it home early she would be in time to stop the fight that Ben and Eliot, her seven-year-old, always seemed to have around bedtime, when her son was reluctant to relinquish his iPad.





She was a young parent, or young by today's standards: twenty-five when she married Ben, and twenty-six when Paula was born, with Eliot coming only two years later. Ben was a freelance writer and worked from home and Margaret sometimes felt jealous that he saw more of the children than she did. Often it was Ben who welcomed them home from school, and most days during the week Ben cooked dinner and helped them with their homework.

Heading home, she always felt anxious to see them all again.

At home, on the mantelpiece, there was a black and white photograph of Margaret reading to her children when they were both small. It was her favourite family photograph. Ben had taken it, snapping them unawares. Eliot was tucked under one arm and Paula under the other, and their three rapt faces were pressed close together, the book blurry in the foreground. Not tonight because she had to go out, but most nights Margaret still tried to read to them.

She indicated and then pulled out on to the M11, just in front of a lorry. Both lanes were busy and she kept to the inside. There was a jeep in front of her and a lot of the splashback landed on Margaret's windscreen. The traffic was travelling at sixty miles an hour, and the road was damp with dirty slush.

Margaret slowed down further as visibility was so poor. Caught in her headlights, the blizzard swirled in concentric circles. When she looked to the left of the windscreen, the flakes darted towards her; when she looked to the right they reformed to focus in on her again. The snow building up on the corners of the windscreen was blinkering her. She could see the red of tail lights in front, but not much else except the illuminated, swirling flakes.

Margaret was not aware of what hit her, but she felt a hard jolt from behind and the airbag exploded. She put her foot on the brake, but her car collided with the jeep in front. The noise of





metal crushing took her breath away. The bonnet of her car rose up before her and everything went dark. She braced herself for great pain, holding her breath and clenching her fists.

No pain came. When she opened her eyes, there was the sound of car alarms and muffled screams and, underneath it all, the trickle and rush of water. She ran her hands over her face and body and could find no wound, although there was a dull ache in her chest from the airbag. She tried the driver's door, but it wouldn't open, even when she shouldered it. She reached for her handbag but it had spilled onto the floor. Her car was contorted and dark and she couldn't see where her phone had fallen. She leaned over and tried to open the passenger door but the impact had damaged that too.

There was a glow from behind the bonnet as if something in the engine had caught fire.

The snow continued to fall, filling the space between the bonnet and the windscreen, so that it felt as if she was being buried. The lights that remained grew fainter. Margaret rubbed on the side window to clear it of condensation and pressed her face against the glass. She could see shapes moving in the darkness, oscillating in the oily puddles reflected by car lights. The shapes were people, she decided. There was also a wavering yellow, which almost looked like flames.

'It's all right,' she said to herself, out loud. Help would come. All she had to do was wait. She slid over in the seat and searched with open palm on the floor for her phone. She found almost everything else: her lip gloss, a packet of tampons, ticket stubs for an Arcade Fire concert, and two hairbrushes.

While she was bent over, head to the floor, she became aware of the smell of petrol: a noxious whiff. It reminded her of hanging out of the car window at petrol stations as a child. She strained to peer out of the small clear corner of her side window.





The grass embankment that ran along the crash barrier had been replaced by a strip of fire.

Margaret's breath suddenly became shallow. It rasped, drying, in her throat.

If she was right, and her fuel tank had been ruptured by the collision and the engine was on fire, then there was a chance that the car would explode.

She wanted to speak to Ben but was now glad that she couldn't find her phone. She wouldn't be able to conceal her fear.

Ben. Just the thought of him brought tears to her eyes. She remembered the smell between his shoulder blades in the middle of the night and the quizzical look in his eyes when she said something he disagreed with; the hunched way he sat over the keyboard in the study when he was working on an article. Then she thought of Paula, impatient to go to drama class, her dinner finished and thinking that Mum was late *again*. She thought of Eliot, lost in a game on his iPad, unaware of the danger she was in, or that his mother might be taken from him.

She looked around for objects that might smash the glass and found a weighted plastic ice scraper down the inside of the driver's door. She used all her strength and succeeded in making a crack in the window.

All she could smell was petrol and her own sweat – her own fear. The car alarms had ceased but had been replaced by the flat-line of car horns. She realised that many more cars must have crashed. The flatlining horns would be drivers slumped against their steering wheels. Through the small triangle of cleared window she could see the shape of the fire moving.

'No,' she screamed, pounding her fists and her head and her shoulders at the window. 'NO.' She knew the insulating snow meant that no one would hear her. She twisted round and





stamped at the glass, pounding with the soles of her flimsy shoes. It hurt but the window held fast.

She didn't want it to end here. So much was unfinished. There was so much she still needed to know, understand, *do*.

Suddenly there was a man by her door, whom she assumed was a fireman. She could see only his dark body. He was pulling on the door handle, putting his weight behind it.

'Thank you,' she mouthed through the glass, hot tears washing her cheeks. 'Thank you.'

The door wouldn't budge. The man picked up something from the road – a piece of metal – and began to pound her window with it.

'Cover your face,' she heard him say through the glass.

Margaret did as he asked – holding her bag in front of her face – but still watched him, waiting for her chance.

The man tried to wedge the metal into the door mechanism but that did not work, so he returned to the cracked driver's window.

'I can't open it,' she heard him say.

She gazed upwards to see him through one of the larger cracks. He was dressed in a dark sweater, not a fireman.

'I'm sorry,' she heard him say, his voice thickened. 'I can't. We don't have much time.'

She bit her lip and once again placed her palm on the cracked pane. 'It's all right,' she said, loud enough for him to hear. 'Thank you for trying. Go. It's all right.'

The man placed his own palm on the other side of the glass and Margaret was sure she felt its warmth. When he took his palm away, she bowed her head and cried, feeling young, almost infantile, reduced to herself and nothing more.

Shafts of light entered the cramped car space when he took





away his hand. Her throat tightened as she wondered how long it would be and if she would suffer. She hoped for an explosion. The thought of burning alive terrified her so much that she picked up the ice scraper again and bashed it against the window.

‘Get back!’

It was the man – his pale face pressed against the glass.

‘I’m gonna try and break it, so sit well back.’

She turned towards the passenger seat and covered her face.

There was a dull sound and when Margaret raised her head, the man’s bloody fist was inside the car. He had punched the glass in, taking the skin from his hand.

The cold air reached inside and the stench of petrol became stronger. The man was pulling the broken glass from the window with his bare hands.

‘I’ll pull you through,’ he said to her.

‘I won’t fit.’

‘Give me your hands!’ As he spoke this time, desperate, authoritative, the scarf he was wearing fell away from his face.

The sight of him was enough to cause her to draw breath, but she did not pull away. It was as if a squid had landed on his face: tentacles grew over his cheeks, forehead and skull and right down his neck. One of the man’s eyes was pulled out of shape, to make way for the tentacle’s path. His skin shone in the oily fiery light, pale and poreless.

Margaret placed her hands in his. He pulled her through fast, although her hips got caught and she landed on top of him.

She lay breathing on the man’s chest, feeling the chill of the snow on her cheeks and scalp and grateful for it. Margaret lifted her face up and saw the gnarled skin of his neck.

He strained to get up, and she could see that he was in pain. He helped her to her feet.





‘Hurry, we need to—’

When they were nearly at the embankment, the car blew up. The explosion reverberated through Margaret, expelling all the air from her lungs. Her mind was bright with the horror of it, but the man pulled her into him and back down on to the road, rolling her over and over as debris fell around them. Margaret felt the great weight of his body above her, and then nothing, then the weight again, pinning her down and rolling her forward, a gravitational momentum. She felt safe there, grateful.

Half of Margaret’s face was in the snow. The stranger raised himself from her and brushed the snow from his body. He was bleeding badly from his forehead. He knelt, watching the blaze, holding his bloody hand in the other. Margaret rolled over and stood up. Her shoes were gone and the icy snow wet the soles of her feet. She could see paramedics in green rushing towards them. She could hear nothing but her own heartbeats and the roar of the fire.

Her car was engulfed in flames and she saw now that the whole of the M11 was a carnage of crashed cars. The motorway was like a scrapyard: upended vehicles and the stench of burning rubber. The blue lights were so far away because even the emergency services couldn’t get close.

Relief flooded into her, warm as a shower. Margaret looked down to the man who had saved her.

‘Were you in the crash too?’ she asked him. ‘You’re hurt. Your hand must be broken and your head . . .’

‘Fine’ was all he said, turning his eyes from her, trying to pull his scarf over his face with his bloodied hand.

‘Its all right,’ Margaret said, putting a hand on his neck. ‘Thank you. I would have died. Now we must get you some help.’

‘I’m fine,’ he said again, then staggered to his feet and walked





away from her, down the lane of concertinaed cars, into the smoke and fire and snow.

‘Wait,’ Margaret called to him, ‘please?’

Paramedics swarmed over the scene. She was wrapped in a space blanket, her pulse was taken and then she was given a tag and instructed where to wait; that she was going to be OK. She gave her details and was told that Ben would be informed.

Margaret shivered on the side of the motorway clutching the foil blanket around her, looking for the burned man who had saved her. She asked the paramedic who tended to her, but he shook his head. ‘I’m not sure I’ve seen him. There’s too many injured. You need to rest now. Just take a break and let us look after you.’

She remembered the heat of the stranger’s palm against hers, and the sheer size of him crouched in the snow, holding his damaged hand to his chest. He had been hurt, she knew he had; she wanted to find him to make sure he got help.





Big George

Friday 27 September, 1985

Big George got up on the table, pint in hand, and began a rendition of 'Sweet Caroline'. He was six foot three with black hair, bright blue eyes, and longer eyelashes than his only sister, Patricia. He was the best looking of all the McLaughlins and had got away with murder for years because of it. He had been his mother's favourite and he could carry a song like her, although it had been years since she had had anything to sing about.

George was on his fourth pint and there was a sheen of glee in his eyes. The whole bar turned to him, clapping in time. The McLaughlins demanded attention, but usually that was enforced with the threat of great violence. Georgie Boy was different. Most people in the East End of Glasgow knew him and were wary of him because of his family, but those who knew him well said that George was a gentle giant. George's father, Brendan, had called him soft, but then they didn't come much harder than Brendan McLaughlin.

George leaned on Tam Driscoll's shoulder as he climbed down





from his impromptu stage. An older man leaving the bar patted George's back: 'Look out, Neil Diamond.'

'Away!' said George over his shoulder, his eyes smiling at the compliment.

'You ready for another, big man?' said Tam.

George nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow with his forearm, and put his empty pint glass on the bar. By the time Tam was served, a table had become available at the periphery of the bar and, tired after his performance, George sat down and ran his hands through his hair.

Tam had recently started working with George in the garage the McLaughlins ran, along the Shettleston Road. The garage was semi-legitimate, although cars were 'cleaned' there. It was as close to the family business as George could bear to be. Tam was a mechanic and a good one, but had only taken the job because he had been out of work for nearly a year.

'I don't want to get involved,' he would whisper to George, his face and hands dark with engine grease, when George's elder brother, Peter visited, clasping and unclasping his gloved hands. Peter had taken over, years ago, after their father had disappeared, presumed dead.

'Me neither,' George had reassured him.

In the few weeks they had known each other George had been in the habit of sharing stories with Tam, as a mark of friendship and trust, but Tam had yet to share anything other than his time and his beer money with George.

George understood Tam's fear, and had decided to be patient. His father had made his name as a heavy for the top loan shark in Glasgow. Even now, in this bar, there would be at least two or three people who had been injured by the McLaughlins. One of the people clapping along to George's song had been Giovanni





DeLuca, who owned the chip shop on the corner. Just the sight of DeLuca in the crowd had made George forget a line, although his audience thought it was the beer. He had watched Giovanni's pale, skeletal hand clapping against his other, strong brown one. At fourteen years old George had watched his father force Giovanni's hand into the deep fat fryer.

Tam walked slowly to their table, careful not to spill the beer. He was a full head shorter than George and fifteen years older, thin and wiry with grey hair cut short. He had taught George how to bleed an engine and how to change an exhaust. George, who had never been any good at school, found he loved learning about cars, and picked up quickly what Tam taught him. He had few friends and he had liked Tam instantly. It was as if Tam was a replacement father figure: benevolent, where Brendan, *God rest his soul*, had been a bastard.

'You just can't help yourself, can you, big yin?'

'Nothing like a wee song to raise the spirits.'

'If you say so.'

George took another long drink of beer. 'No, no, not this time,' he said, drunk and patting Tam on the chest. 'Not if I say so. I want . . .' George swallowed a hiccup, 'to hear what you have to say for once. You're the man. The man that can. You're my teacher, my maestro.'

'Och away. You're just haverin' now.'

'I'm serious, by the way. I have serious respect for you. Serious respect. But you never talk about yourself. Tell me about you – YOU – give me your craick.'

'There's not much to say, really,' said Tam.

Even through the blur of beer, George could tell that his friend was worried. George was big like his father had been, but he had his mother's heart. His brothers, and his sister to a large extent,





had been inured to the violence. George and his mother had empathy, which they had polished in each other, a pearl in the mud and dirt of their lives. She had died just last year, cruelly, unfairly, dying of a simple infection after surviving a lifetime of violence.

‘You have a family,’ persisted George. ‘You never talk about them.’

‘There’s not much to say.’

Only Tam’s eyes moved on his face.

‘You have a daughter. How old is she?’

‘Fifteen,’ said Tam, his voice faint, as if at confession.

‘I’m only asking,’ said George, squeezing the older man’s arm. ‘I just want to know who you are, for Chrissake. If you consider it personal, then just tell me to piss off. I’m not your priest.’

Tam nodded. Once again, George read something in his eyes.

‘You’re not a Catholic, are you?’

‘My mother was a Catholic. I have nothing against—’

‘I don’t give a shit what you believe in. For Christ’s sake, believing in anything at all is hard enough, is it not? You’re my man and if you’re a Proddy then that’s good with me.’

Tam said nothing, nodding. There was a sheen of sweat on his face. George took another sip of beer and decided to return to his old tactics of sharing his own life and hoping that Tam would feel comfortable enough to reciprocate.

‘You’re lucky,’ George said, sitting back and folding his arms. They were side by side on the red pleather bench. George surveyed the oval island of the bar as he spoke, deliberately trying to relax his friend. ‘I envy you, having a daughter. Having a daughter changes a man. I mean, it didn’t change my father, but he was a special case. It changed me.’

George took a deep breath. Just the word *daughter* took him out





of himself. It was like a breach in his drunkenness, a portal to another state of consciousness.

‘I didn’t know you had a daughter,’ said Tam, quietly.

George turned to him again, smiling broadly. ‘Have a gander at this,’ he said, unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it back to show Tam his chest. There, above his heart, tattooed in red ink, was the name *Moll*.

‘Moll was your daughter?’ said Tam, taking another sip.

‘She is my daughter. She’s not dead. She’s alive.’

Tam licked his lips. George could tell he was interested but afraid to ask more. George took another drink of beer and then told Tam the whole story.

‘You won’t know Kathleen Jamieson, but I started seeing her soon as I left school, and I told you already that I was chucked out when I was fourteen, so it was early on. She was my first love . . . my only love, I suppose. Five, six years we were together, on the sly most of the time, because her family didn’t like her hanging around with me. She was a nice girl, you understand. Anyway, we weren’t careful and she got pregnant. I was happy when she told me, because I’m not like other guys. I always wanted to be married and have children. I wanted to start my own family since I was six or seven years old . . .’ George stopped for a long, hearty laugh. ‘Probably because my own was such a fucking nightmare, wouldn’t you say?’

Tam conceded a smile. He smiled on one side of his face, while the other half remained guarded, almost sad.

‘Her family were really devout – you know the types: a Hail Mary every time you fart. Pregnant and unmarried was bad enough, but pregnant *to the likes of me* . . . Well, they of course said she would have to have the baby. I was straight round there with the diamond ring and everything, but they were having none of it. They told me she’d had a miscarriage and had gone to visit her





aunt to recover. I was sure they'd packed her off to a convent, like they did in the sixties. My mother said as much. She was the only one in my family I told . . . about the baby.'

George put a cigarette between his lips and patted his pockets for his matches until Tam gave him a light. He took a long drag, wincing as he inhaled.

'What happened?' said Tam.

George was encouraged.

'Well, it was just after Christmas and I was thinking of Kathleen and popped round to the Jamiesons' one morning after mass, just to ask for news of her. I thought they'd tell me to piss off, but when I arrived, Kathleen was there and *in labour*. Her father was out, and I think had all but washed his hands of her by that point, and so did I not end up giving her, her mother and her sister a lift to the hospital.

'We were in there for the longest time. I ran out of fags. It was the middle of the night when my daughter was born, and I remember me and this other expectant father were sharing a flask of whisky in the waiting room. Only . . . it was his third, and he knew he was going home with the bairn.' George looked at a spot in the distance as he remembered. 'I can't tell you what it was like when I saw her for the first time.'

'The bairn?'

'She was so beautiful. Did you feel like that . . . ?'

Tam raised his eyebrows.

'Molly. I called her Moll. She has my eyes. Kathleen let me hold her, although her mother and sister were complaining that I stank of whisky and kept shouting at me to mind and not drop her. I don't know how you felt, but there's nothing so humbling for a man. My father'll turn in his grave if he hears me say this, but I just wanted a wee girl.'





'Girls are a lot less trouble, so they say' was all that Tam would concede.

'After I'd seen that bairn, I was in love. I would have done anything for her. When she got out of hospital me and Kathleen went to register the birth and we went for a walk and I proposed to her all over again. On my knees in Glasgow Green . . . *on my fucking knees*, but . . . she said she was seeing some other guy.'

'How d'you mean?'

'Her family had sorted it all out, I've no doubt. No doubt in my mind at all. Some old bastard that was willing to take on a fallen woman and her child. I mean did these people not know it was nineteen seventy-seven. Nineteen fucking seventy-seven!'

'They married her off?'

'Kathleen was upset, crying. She told me it was the only way . . . Her family were angry at her, but over their dead bodies would they let her marry me. She'd changed. She was cold towards me. You know what women are like. "*Forget about her, Georgie*," she told me.'

'I'm sorry,' said Tam, taking a long sip of beer. The bell for last orders sounded.

George nodded, looking at a point far in the distance. 'You for another?' he asked.

'I'm all right,' said Tam, looking into the remainder of his beer.

'Ah, go on, it's payday after all,' said George, slapping his wallet on the table.

Tam nodded his assent. George felt his balance wavering as he stood to return to the bar, but he found it again after a second or two.

'Thanks, big man,' said Tam when George returned, spilling a little beer on the table.

They were silent for a while, watching the other men in the





bar. It was mostly men. The room was tinged blue with smoke and George felt his mind heavy with beer and memories.

‘Do you ever think about getting out of here?’ said George quietly, but facing the room of people rather than Tam beside him.

‘Sometimes,’ said Tam, hedging his bets, as always. ‘Why?’

‘Can I count you as a friend?’ said George, turning to look Tam in the eye. Tam’s own furtive eyes widened for a moment, under George’s gaze.

Tam swallowed and then licked his lips as if in anticipation.

‘You need to keep it to yourself.’

Tam nodded.

‘I found a bit of money. It would only do you harm to know where, so I won’t mention it, but it’s enough – enough to totally disappear with – and I’m planning on disappearing. Now you see me . . .’ said George, elbowing Tam to coax a smile from him, ‘now you don’t.’

‘Where are you going?’ said Tam, his face suddenly grey and drawn.

‘North first, then south. I’m not going alone.’

‘I . . . Georgie, I have a family. I’m a quiet man . . .’

George allowed another fit of laughter to erupt from his body, although beneath the beer and the joviality he was deadly serious.

‘I’m not talking about you, Tam, relax! Christ. I think *I*’m a worrywart, but I’ve got nothing on you. I mean, I like you and all, but I wasn’t planning on running away with you.’

Colour returned to Tam’s face. He was too thin-skinned and scrawny for a full blush but he coloured all the same.

George unbuttoned his shirt again and placed his right palm over the tattoo, as if he were making a pledge.

‘I found her, you see,’ said George, his eyes fixed on a horizon far beyond the walls of the Portland Arms.





‘Who, Kathleen?’

‘I didn’t get to finish my story. Kathleen went north with some old fella and it crushed me, but . . . well, I tried to get over her. You’ve no idea what I was like when I was younger – pissed every night and going with whatever lassie’d have me. I did all that but I couldn’t get her and the bairn out of my mind. I couldn’t forget how it had felt to hold my own daughter in my arms and to see her face and see my own in hers. It changes a man. Did it not change you?’

Again George looked to Tam for some kind of validation.

‘They’re bonny when they’re young, that’s for sure’ was all Tam would give.

‘Anyway, I didn’t care for a few years, or told myself I didn’t. I had no idea where they were anyway. Kathleen was gone – not in Glasgow – and she’d basically said that her and the wean were well shot of me. But then I met Wee Malkie. He’d been on the oilrigs and had done work all over the north of Scotland. Did he not run into Kathleen with the wean? He said the wee one was the spit of me.’

‘When was that?’

‘Two years ago. I’ve found out where she lives.’

‘Two years, people move.’

‘People move, but not if you have a big house in Thurso. I know where they are.’

George downed the rest of his pint and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tam was smiling again – that strange smile he offered when Peter was in the garage. His eyes were scrunched up, which made people think it was a proper smile, but somehow it was out of synch with his mouth. His mouth was wary to commit. When Tam smiled like that, it looked as if he was in pain.





George turned to him, unsmiling, honest, wishing something worthy of Brendan McLaughlin: wishing that Tam was a bigger man. But George was not his father and George was determined to trust small, thin, terrified Tam, who knew an engine as a surgeon knew a body.

‘I have the means,’ said George slowly, leaning in so close that he could smell the starch on Tam’s Friday-night shirt. ‘Third time lucky. I’m going up north to ask Kathleen to be mine and then the three of us can go away together – me, Kathleen and my wee girl.’

‘Where on earth would you go?’

George leaned in closer to Tam, and spoke to him in a whisper. ‘Can I trust you?’ he said, squeezing Tam’s upper arm.

‘Yes.’

‘You ever heard of a wee place called Penzance in Cornwall?’

‘Cornwall, aye.’

‘Well, I want to live there, in peace and quiet, right by the sea. That’s where we’re gonna be – me and my own wee family.’

‘Why would you go there? Who do you know from there?’

‘No one. My mother’s family were from there. My mum lived there when she was wee and she used to tell me about it – the open spaces and the sea, the tiny wee houses. My mother owned some land there, a cottage on the South West Coast Path, between Sennen and Porthcurno. It’s almost a ruin now, I believe. I’ve never been there although she showed me pictures. My mother left it to me in her will. It was a secret, just between us. My brothers and sister don’t know. If my mother could’ve run away, back to that place, she would’ve. She told me all about it and that’s where I’m gonna be. I’m gonna fix it up – build it from scratch if I have to – and live there with my family. My own family.’





‘You’re hawering, man. If Kathleen’s married, what makes you think she’ll want back with you?’

‘Would you take a look at this face, Tam. Just take a look at this face,’ said George, raising his chin, his eyes brightening.

‘I know but . . .’

‘But what? She loves me. She’s always loved me. Plus, I’m that wee girl’s father and I think she deserves to know me.’

‘What would you do with a baby?’

‘She’s not a baby any longer, is she?’

‘How old is she now?’

‘Seven.’

