

ALAN GLYNN

Winterland



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Prologue

How has it come to this?

Gina doesn't know – but she looks across the warehouse floor at the three men and decides she can't take any more of it. She has to leave. It's just too much.

'I'm . . . I'll be outside,' she says, though it's barely audible.

She turns and walks over to the metal door. Her hand is shaking as she opens it. She steps outside, into the cold night air.

With her back to the closed door, she takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.

After a moment, she opens them again. It's a fairly desolate scene out here. In one direction the floodlit yard of this industrial park leads to a graffiti-covered wall at the back of a housing estate. In the other direction there are more warehouses, and you can just about see the road up ahead – which is dead quiet at the moment. Five minutes west of here there is a major roundabout, and even at this time of night it would be busy with traffic.

Gina can't believe she's feeling lonely for traffic.

She looks up. The sky is clear and the moon is so dazzlingly bright that it's almost pulsating. She stays huddled in the doorway, puts her back to the wind and tries to get one of Fitz's cigarettes going, cupping her hand around it and flicking the Zippo repeatedly until it takes.

Then, inhaling deeply, she steps away from the door. The intense glow from the moon tonight, combined with the orange

wash of the floodlights, gives the space out here an air of unreality, the eerie and soulless feel of a virtual environment. She wishes that that's what this whole thing were – a simulation, a game, something she could tinker with and reprogramme. But she knows there is no – can be no – digital equivalent, or even approximation, of anxiety, of guilt, of fear.

This is real and it's happening now.

But what if Terry Stack finds out where Mark Griffin is? Will that mean it's been worth it? Will that mean she did the right thing by calling him?

Or is it all too toxic now for such a clean exchange?

As she takes her next drag on the cigarette, Gina hears a weird sound. It is short and shrill and penetrating. She looks up and remains still for a few seconds, listening.

She really can't be sure that the sound wasn't just some form of distortion carried here from a distance by the wind.

She closes her eyes.

But neither can she be sure that it didn't come from nearby, from directly behind her, and that it wasn't a scream.

One

1

He is sitting in what they now call the beer garden. Before the smoking ban came into force it was a concrete yard, a skanky area at the back of the pub that was all stacked crates and kegs and empty cardboard boxes. But with a little outdoor furniture – decking, benches, tables, pole umbrellas for when it rains – they’ve transformed it into a ‘space’, a haven where smokers can congregate, light up their Players or Sweet Afton and give out about the excesses of the nanny state. There has even been some confusion, not to say tension, over etiquette. If a non-smoker occupies the last available seat, as might happen in summer or on an unseasonably balmy evening in winter, is he obliged to give that seat up to the next smoker who comes along?

Well, in this establishment, *yes* actually, because if you don’t smoke – the logic runs – what are you doing out here in the first place and what kind of a fucking baby are you anyway?

But tonight the question doesn’t arise. It’s a cold and drizzly Monday, just right for the season, and only five people, hard-core smokers, have come outside with their cigarettes and lighters (plus pints, vodkas, whatever) and settled themselves under the various umbrellas.

‘Poxy night,’ he says, and laughs. This fat, pasty-faced twenty-six-year-old then stares across the beer garden at the

young couple who are sitting opposite him. After a moment, he stares at the two old-timers sitting next to them.

One of these old-timers, Christy Mullins, nods his head in agreement. He reckons it's better than doing nothing. He reckons that the fat, pasty-faced man in the denim jacket and white shirt over there isn't someone you just ignore. He reckons that life is short enough as it is.

Still grinning, the fat, pasty-faced man nods back. He then takes a long, serious drag from his cigarette, gazing up at the illuminated, slow-falling drizzle as he does so.

He's a regular here, but not everyone knows who he is.

Christy, for example, doesn't know who he is – though he's certainly seen him from time to time, and even remembers, now that he thinks about it, a specific incident that happened some months back. However, he couldn't give you his name or tell you anything about him.

Which is exactly the way the man himself would like to keep it, because he's not into any of this celebrity crap – talking to *Sunday World* journalists or going on *Liveline*. He doesn't consider it good for business.

'Poxy Irish weather,' he then says, half to himself now, and not looking at anyone in particular. 'Poxy Minister for poxy fuckin' Health.'

Christy manages to ignore this, getting lost for a moment in a minor coughing fit. He then raises his pint with one hand and taps his cigarette against the ashtray with the other. That incident he does remember happened late one summer evening out here in the beer garden. The place was crowded, and the fat, pasty-faced man was sitting with a group of other – what were they – twenty-five-, twenty-six-year-olds? They were all drinking pints, smoking, digging each other in the ribs

and laughing. Suddenly, out in the street, a car alarm went off – a high-pitched, brain-piercing wail. The immediate reaction around the tables was a collective sigh of exasperation, and then, as the wail continued, a loud ‘Ah Jaysus’ from someone near the door leading into the main part of the pub.

It was obvious that the offending car was parked very close by, and possibly even right outside the pub. But something else was becoming obvious, too. As the general hubbub gave way to the mute frustration of shaking heads, one of the fat, pasty-faced man’s co-drinkers put his pint down and said, in everyone’s hearing, ‘Isn’t that yours?’

Or –

‘Isn’t that yours, *Noel*.’

That was it. He called him Noel. Christy remembers now.

‘Isn’t that yours, Noel?’

At which fat, pasty-faced Noel shrugged his shoulders. ‘So?’

‘I just –’

‘Well, don’t fucking *just* anything.’

‘But –’

‘Shut *up*, right?’

Noel then reached for his glass, and as he took a sip from it, staring ahead, not saying a word to anyone, an almost complete silence, icy and incredulous, descended on the beer garden, with only one sound remaining – the ceaseless, demented wail of the car alarm.

Christy threw his eyes up. People were obviously afraid of this young pup, and it sickened him. Who was he anyway, one of these gangland thugs you read about in the papers?

Noel took another sip from his pint, and a drag from his cigarette. Minutes passed, or what seemed like minutes.

Eventually an elderly woman at the next table piped up. 'Ah here, love,' she said, 'come on, I'm getting an awful headache.'

It was only then that Noel stubbed out his cigarette and got up from the table to leave. He was huge, Christy saw – not only fat, but tall and broad as well. A barman appeared in the doorway just as Noel was approaching it. The barman's eyebrows were raised, ready for a confrontation.

'All right, all right,' Noel said, strolling past him, 'keep your fucking hair on.'

Less than a minute later, the car alarm stopped. Noel didn't come back, and noise levels in the beer garden gradually returned to normal.

Now, of course, it is much quieter – later in the evening, later in the year. Darker, colder. The young man and woman, huddled close together, are more or less whispering to each other. The two old-timers, in contemplative mode, have barely exchanged a word since they came out here. Noel himself has been the most voluble, finding it unnatural to be sitting alone, not talking to anyone. He would rather annoy strangers, roping them into any conversation at all, than sit in silence.

'I was watching that fucking Discovery Channel the other night,' he says, lighting up a cigarette. 'Apparently there's over *two hundred* types of shark in the sea.'

The young man and woman both look up, startled. Christy glances over as well.

'Tiger sharks, hammerhead sharks, pigeye sharks, Ga-fucking-*lapagos* sharks.'

With his cigarette in one hand, Christy puts his other hand up to his chest and coughs. He is retired now, but for fifty years he worked as a barber, and in that time he had plenty of what

you might call ‘characters’ in his chair. He recognises this Noel across the way as a distinct character type himself.

Unstable, unpredictable, dangerous.

‘The great white is the only shark that sticks its head out of the water to look around. Amazing, isn’t it?’

Again – though he’s barely listening – Christy nods his head in agreement. All he wants is a quiet smoke.

‘I love those names,’ Noel says, flicking ash to the ground. ‘They’re mad. Fucking *hammerhead*, what?’

The young couple have turned back in towards each other and are whispering again.

‘I said they’re mad, *aren’t they?*’ He is staring directly across at the young couple now, but they don’t seem to have noticed. Christy rests his cigarette in the ashtray.

‘*Love!*’ Noel shouts.

The young woman looks up.

‘The *names*. I said they’re fucking mad, aren’t they?’

She doesn’t say anything. Christy can’t tell if she’s nervous or annoyed.

‘Well?’ Noel says.

‘Well *what?*’ the young woman says, definitely annoyed. Her boyfriend hasn’t looked up yet. He’s definitely nervous.

‘What do you mean *well what?* Don’t fucking *well what?* me, you frigid little bitch.’

Christy throws his eyes up.

The boyfriend exhales loudly and slaps the palm of his hand on the table.

‘What’s *your* problem?’ Noel says. ‘You bleedin’ ponce.’

‘Stop it,’ Christy says. ‘Enough of that.’

Everyone turns now and looks at Christy.

‘Who asked *you?*’ Noel says.

‘You’re nothing but a bowsie,’ Christy says. ‘Do you know that?’

Noel holds up his cigarette. ‘See this? I’ll stick it in your fucking eye if you don’t shut up.’

There is a long silence.

Christy wants to say *Go ahead, I’d like to see you try*, but when he opens his mouth to speak, nothing happens. He’s seventy-three years old after all. He’s thin and wiry and actually quite frail. He has more or less permanent bronchitis from decades of smoking unfiltered cigarettes.

So what does he think he’s doing?

The man beside Christy, nudging him in the elbow, whispers, ‘Leave it, Christy, leave it.’

But with his heart thumping, Christy makes another attempt, and this time he manages to get it out.

‘Go ahead, fatso,’ he says – the ‘fatso’ coming out of nowhere – ‘I’d like to see you try.’

‘Whoa,’ Noel says, sliding along the bench to get out from behind the table, ‘*What did you say?*’

For some reason, as Christy stares over at Noel, all he can think about is the newspaper headline this is going to generate. More specifically, and like a knotted synapse in his brain, it’s the wording he can’t get past: VICIOUS THUG ASSAULTS PENSIONER. VICIOUS ASSAULT ON PENSIONER BY THUG. THUG IN VICIOUS ASSAULT ON PENSIONER.

Noel gets to the edge of the bench, and pauses. He takes a drag from his cigarette.

The young woman, meanwhile, stubs hers out. She picks up the lighter and pack of Silk Cut from the table and stuffs them into her bag. Slouched next to her, the young man is trying to look casual, unconcerned.

‘Come on,’ she says to him, ‘we’re going.’

PENSIONER VICIOUSLY ASSAULTED BY THUG.

With the cigarette now dangling from his lips, Noel glares over at Christy. He brings his hands together, intertwines them, stretches his arms out and then cracks all of his knuckles simultaneously.

As Christy glares back, a part of him doesn’t believe this is happening. He glances down at his half-finished pint on the table, and at the pack of Sweet Afton beside it, and at the smoke rising slowly from his cigarette in the ashtray. It’s a familiar, comforting scene, almost like a still life, and he doesn’t understand how it can be about to change so radically.

But then, unexpected as this whole thing has been, something even more unexpected happens.

Just as the young couple are about to get up from their table, and as Noel is getting up from his, a figure comes rushing through the doorway of the pub and out into the middle of the beer garden. Tall and reedy, he is wearing a dark-coloured anorak and jeans, and – it takes people a second to realise it, to process what they’re seeing – he’s also wearing a balaclava.

Like with the impact of an explosion, there is a recoil from this around the garden. What follows it, though, isn’t panic. Instead, rapid calculations are made, probabilities are looked at, and soon it’s clear – at least to four of the five people out here – that all any of them can do now is hold their breath and *watch*.

The young man and woman remain frozen. The man beside Christy remains frozen, and Christy himself, stifling a cough, remains frozen.

Noel certainly isn’t resigned to watching this happen, but he

remains frozen too, only his eyes darting left and right. There isn't much else he can do in the circumstances.

The tall, reedy man, his anorak glistening in the rain, appears to hesitate. But then he turns a fraction and is suddenly face to face with Noel – four feet away from him, five at most.

Noel shifts his weight to the edge of the bench.

From where Christy is sitting, he can see the man in the anorak raising his right arm and stretching it out. The gun in the man's gloved hand is metal grey, almost black, and looks like an extension of the glove.

Noel is trembling all over now. He feels a sudden stream of warm, beery piss making its way down his leg. He seems to have no muscular control left. All around him he hears a voice, high-pitched and whining, and he even manages to feel contempt for it – before realising it's his own voice.

Then there is a loud crack. It is followed immediately by another one and another one after that.

Christy starts coughing. The air is damp from the rain, but it is smoky and acrid now as well.

The man in the anorak runs to a wall at the rear of the garden and jumps at it. Grabbing hold of the top, he pulls himself up and swings a leg over. In a second, he has disappeared. A few seconds after that, Christy hears a motorcycle revving up and taking off. He looks over at the others. The young woman, only half standing up, is clutching her boyfriend's sleeve. The boyfriend is sitting down again. People have started pouring out from the main area of the pub.

Christy remains seated. He looks over at Noel, who is still at his table, but slumped forward now, his head at an awkward angle. He looks like someone who has drunk too much and

passed out. From the angle Christy is at, and before his view is closed off, he is able to make out a bullet hole in Noel's forehead. There is a small trickle of blood coming from it.

Christy looks down at his pint, and at the cigarette in the ashtray. Smoke is still rising from the cigarette. He lifts it up and takes a drag from it. In all his decades as a smoker, no cigarette has ever tasted as good.

PENSIONER'S RACING PULSE RETURNS TO NORMAL.

He glances around. A lot of people are just standing in the rain now. They are in shock, waiting for something to happen. Most of them are talking – to each other or into mobile phones. Some have umbrellas, others are huddled into their jackets.

The man beside Christy nudges him again in the elbow.

'Jesus,' he says, lifting his pint, 'it's all go here tonight, what?'

2

One of the mobile calls made out of the beer garden is to a guy in Dolphin's Barn, a 'business associate' of Noel's. This business associate calls someone who lives in Stonybatter, and the person who lives in Stonybatter calls a cousin of his in Crumlin, who in turn calls someone *he* knows in Dolanstown. Within minutes, everyone in Dublin knows what's happened. Well, not *everyone* – that comes with the next news bulletin on the radio at ten or eleven o'clock – but everyone who matters.

Noel's mother, Catherine, hears about it from her brother – who's also called Noel. He's in a hotel bar in the city centre with an associate of his own, Paddy Norton, the chairman of

Winterland Properties. The two men are in the middle of a heated argument when Noel gets the call from Jackie, and though it's awkward he holds a hand up, excuses himself and goes outside. He then gets on the phone to Catherine, breaks the news and tells her he'll be out to her gaff in twenty minutes. She's hysterical, but what can he do? He's barely able to get his head around the news himself.

He walks to the multilevel car park down the street and takes the elevator up to the top.

The weird thing is, although his nephew was undoubtedly a pain in the arse – unpredictable, hard to get along with, maybe even a little messed up in the head (not unlike his old man, come to think of it) – he wasn't stupid, and by all accounts he was pretty level-headed when it came to business.

So what happened?

Noel can only guess. Most gangland killings, apparently, in the end, come down to one of three things: a turf dispute, someone creaming off the top, or a clash of personalities. All three are possible in this case, he supposes, though knowing his nephew, only the last one seems really likely.

Noel climbs into his SUV and makes his way down the five levels to the entrance as fast as he can, tyres screeching at every turn. But Dublin's nightlife is hopping and when he pulls out onto Drury Street the traffic is practically at a standstill. He hunches over the steering wheel.

He doesn't need this, just as he doesn't need the band of pain that starts throbbing now behind his eyes.

The traffic moves forward, but only a yard or two. It stops again.

Rubbing his eyes, Noel thinks back to what happened in the hotel bar. He didn't need *that* either. He didn't need Paddy

Norton jabbing him in the chest with his finger, and he certainly didn't need another rundown of the arguments – arguments he's been hearing incessantly now for the last two or three days. The timing of Jackie's call didn't help either, of course. Leaving in a hurry like that made it seem as if he were running away. It was –

Noel shakes his head.

What he *does* need here, maybe, is a little perspective. Richmond Plaza, like any big development, is going to have its fair share of problems. All the ones so far have been surmountable, and this one won't be any different.

His nephew, on the other hand, is *dead*.

As they approach George's Street, the traffic loosens up a bit. Noel takes his mobile out again. He needs to talk to someone. He calls Jackie and asks him if he's heard anything else.

'No, and it's a little strange to tell you the truth. I called around, but pretty much hit a brick wall.'

A detective superintendent based in Harcourt Street, Jackie Merrigan is a good friend of Noel's and – important in the construction industry – a valuable source of information inside Garda headquarters. Over the last year or so, as a favour to Noel, he's also been providing updates of a different kind.

'So, what do you think?' Noel asks. 'Was it a professional hit?'

'Oh, I'd say so, yeah.'

'Jesus.'

'It has all the hallmarks.'

Noel pauses, shaking his head. 'I'm still in shock here. I mean, I was having a drink with Paddy Norton and I just walked out on the man, didn't look back.'

'Understandable, Noel.'

‘Yeah. Listen. Thanks. Anyway, I’m heading out to my sister’s now.’

‘Right.’ There is a pause. ‘Pass on my condolences, will you?’

‘Sure. I’ll talk to you again.’

Noel hits End. As he holds the phone in his hand, something occurs to him. He left his folder sitting on the hotel bar.

Shit.

What does he do now? Call Norton? Arrange to swing by his house later to pick it up? He’ll have to. He’s got that conference call in the morning with head office in Paris.

Shit.

But he can’t be thinking about this now. He *can’t*. He puts the phone back into his pocket.

A couple of minutes later, he’s turning off the South Circular, then crossing the canal, and once he’s on Clogher Road, at this time of night, it’s a straight run all the way out to Dolanstown.

3

Alone in the house, Catherine is reeling from the news. When the phone rang, she was sipping a vodka and Coke, but now she refills the glass with just vodka and takes a long hit from it. She puts the glass down and picks up her mobile. She phones one of her sisters, Yvonne, who lives nearby, and tells her the news. After the initial shock, Yvonne is all business. She says give her fifteen minutes, that she’ll call Michelle and Gina and then come over. Catherine also calls Mrs Collins next door, who says she’ll come in and sit with her until Yvonne arrives.

The TV is still on. Catherine was watching a rerun of *Friends*, and even though she's not watching it now, she can't bring herself to turn it off – not until someone arrives, it's company, and anyway holding the remote in her hand makes her feel like she's doing something, like *she's* in control. Through all of this – the calls, the standing around, the *Friends* – she continues crying, either in silence, with tears running down her cheeks, or at full tilt – all out and uncontrollable. At one point, she catches sight of herself in the mirror and gets a fright. Is she really that old looking? Is she really that *old*?

This all seems unreal to her, like it's happening to someone else. Given what Noel was involved in, though, it's not as if she hasn't already pictured the scene a hundred times, on a hundred other nights. It's just that the reality of it is, well . . . different.

When Mrs Collins arrives Catherine immediately regrets having phoned her. The woman is kind, but *too* kind, you know, she'd smother you with kindness, and now five seconds in the door she's already hard at it. After a while Yvonne arrives and takes over, thankfully – even though the first thing she does is whip the glass of vodka away from Catherine, saying a shot or two is fine, for your nerves, but you don't want to overdo it. The cops'll be here soon, she says, and you'll probably have to go somewhere to identify the body, and anyway there'll be plenty of time for drinking later. Then she puts the kettle on – the kettle, the fucking *kettle*.

Catherine hates the kettle.

'Yes, that's it,' Mrs Collins says, looking uneasily into the kitchen after Yvonne, 'a nice cup of tea.'

The 'nice' really grates on Catherine's nerves. To distract herself, she glances over at the framed photographs arranged

on shelves in the corner of the lounge. She stands up and walks across the room to get a closer look at them.

She can't believe this. She was eighteen years old when Noel was born, and just *look* at her. She was fucking gorgeous. Every bloke in the area wanted to ride her and wouldn't leave her alone, so it was no surprise when she got pregnant – but of course it *did* have to be with a mad bastard like Jimmy Dempsey. Not that it mattered though. Once she had the baby, she didn't care, and was even relieved when Jimmy fecked off to England. Noel was *her* baby. He wasn't a Dempsey, he was a Rafferty – and a Noel Rafferty at that, just like her brother.

The photos are arranged in order and she gazes at each one of them in turn.

Oh God, she thinks, biting her lip – the little *fella*. Look at him there – as a baby, a boy, a teenager. That's his life . . . *all* of his life now.

Starting to sob again, she turns away. Yvonne approaches her with a cup of tea. Catherine wants to say *Fuck off, would you, I don't want tea*, but she doesn't, she takes it.

The doorbell rings.

Noel.

As he comes in through the hallway, Catherine rushes out from the lounge to meet him. They stand there locked in a tight embrace for up to a minute.

Catherine has always adored her brother, even though in recent years they haven't seen each other as much as they used to, or anyway as much as she'd like. Noel has been up to his eyes with work, spending every waking hour, it seems, locked away in meetings, off on foreign junkets or just stuck on building sites. However, there's more to it than that, and it hits her now, what she's known all along but hasn't ever wanted to admit.

With her son's growing profile, mentions in the paper and so on . . . had he become something of a liability as far as her brother was concerned, a potential embarrassment?

Meaning what?

Catherine doesn't know, but in her confusion she allows the thought a little space to breathe. As she stands there in Noel's arms, stroking the silky texture of his suit and losing herself in the haze of his cologne, she wonders if maybe, at some level, he isn't relieved to have his young nephew permanently out of the picture.

But once the thought is formed, she flinches from it, and confusion quickly gives way to shame.

Noel is the first to extract himself from the embrace. He then holds Catherine's face in his hands and stares into her eyes.

'I'm *so* sorry, Catherine,' he says.

Her face crumples again and they re-embrace for a moment. Yvonne comes out from the kitchen. She and Noel acknowledge each other with silent nods. Somehow, they all move into the lounge and end up sitting on sofas. But it feels weirdly polite, like it's some kind of formal occasion. There's a tension in the room, and no one seems to know what it is.

Then Mrs Collins stands up and it becomes clear.

'I'll just slip away,' she whispers, nodding at Yvonne and then at Noel. She glances at Catherine and cocks her head sideways. But suddenly she's gone and it's just the three of them.

Family.

But this doesn't last very long.

The doorbell rings again and Catherine's heart lurches. She thinks maybe it's Michelle or Gina.

As Yvonne goes out to answer it, Catherine and Noel remain still, looking across the room at each other in silence, listening.

The door opens.

‘Good evening, ma’am.’

It’s a deep voice, an accent – a fucking culchie.

Noel stands up. ‘The guards,’ he says quietly.

He goes out.

Catherine listens to the shuffling in the hallway as two or maybe even three of them come in. Not much is being said. She imagines some pointing going on, faces being made, heads nodding. Then comes the moment she dreads. She looks up as two uniformed guards step into the room. Over their uniforms they have on those yellow reflective jackets that make them look like Teletubbies. They both have hangdog expressions on their faces, and are followed by a plainclothes detective, a shorter, older man in a navy suit. This isn’t the first time the guards have been to the house, but it’s the first time they’ve ever been let in the door. Catherine feels a flicker of indignation. She knows how Noel would feel about this. But she doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t have the will. There are too many other things going on in her head, vying for her attention – memories of Noel, images, snatches of things he said. She’d love another hit from that glass of vodka.

Where did Yvonne leave it?

‘Mrs Rafferty?’

Mrs? She’s not even going to correct them on that one.

She looks up. They’re standing around awkwardly. No one tells them to sit down.

‘What?’ she says.

The detective steps forward. ‘I’m afraid we’ve got some bad news for you, Mrs Rafferty.’

She realises he's only doing his duty, that it's a formality, but she can't help thinking what Noel would be saying if he was here now, he'd be saying, 'Listen, you stupid fucking bogman, tell us something we *don't* know.'

4

On Wicklow Street, parked near Louis Copeland's, Paddy Norton sits slumped in his BMW, staring at his mobile phone. He has just walked back from the hotel, not the better yet of Noel Rafferty's sudden appearance in the bar forty-five minutes earlier.

What in God's name does he do now?

He hesitates, and then places his mobile on top of the folder lying on the passenger seat beside him. He reaches into his pocket and produces a small silver pillbox. He opens it and taps two Narolet tablets out into the palm of his hand. He raises his hand, knocks the two tablets into his mouth and swallows them back dry. With the booze he already has in his system these should kick in pretty soon, help him to calm down.

It's fairly cold outside but he's sweating. He draws the back of his hand across his upper lip.

He shifts his considerable weight in the seat. The car is spacious, roomy, but Norton gives it a run for its money all the same.

He looks down at the phone again.

It was enough of a shock having Noel turn up unexpectedly in the first place, but what was the story then with him rushing off like that – pale all of a sudden, barely a word, no

explanation? And who had that been on his mobile? Was it a tip-off of some kind?

Hardly.

There's nothing for it. Norton has to talk to Fitz. The arrangement was no direct contact for at least a week, but clearly that doesn't apply anymore, not in these circumstances.

He picks up his phone again, selects a number and hits Call.

As he is waiting, he feels the first, vague stirrings of the Narolet in his system.

Anticipa-a-tion.

Soon he'll have to keep reminding himself that he is, in fact, extremely angry.

The call is answered with a '*Yep?*'

'What happened?'

Silence at first, then, 'Jesus, I thought –'

'*What happened?*'

More silence, as well as some eye-rolling probably. Then, 'It went OK.'

'What do you mean? I've just had a fucking *drink* with the guy.'

'What are you talking about? *I've* just had it confirmed.'

Norton says nothing. His breathing pattern is slow, laboured, quite loud. He waits for more.

'It happened an hour ago, less.'

In the silence that follows, Norton struggles to contain himself. He wants to be explicit, but he can't. They're on mobiles here. They have to be discreet.

'Well, I don't understand,' he says eventually, the Narolet all over him now like a heavy blanket of snow. 'Something's gone wrong. Check again. *Christ*. I'll ring you back.'

He puts the phone down, but just as he's about to start the car up, it rings – Vivaldi, one of the seasons.

He grabs the phone again, hoping that it's Ray Sullivan. New York is five hours behind, so Ray Sullivan could easily still be in his office at this time.

Norton looks at the display on the phone.

But it's not Ray Sullivan. It's Noel.

He takes a deep breath.

'What happened to *you*?'

'Listen, Paddy, I'm sorry for skipping off like that, but there's been an emergency, a family thing. It's . . . it's awful.'

'Jesus,' Norton swallows. 'What?'

'My nephew's been shot. In a pub. He's dead.'

Norton closes his eyes and says, '*Oh fuck.*' Then he exhales loudly, deflating like a balloon.

'Yeah,' Noel says, 'I'm out at my sister's house now. She's in bits of course. The cops are here. It's chaos.'

'Well, look, I'm sorry,' Norton says, very quietly. 'Your nephew, wasn't –'

'Yeah, Catherine's lad, Noel. He was into all sorts of shit, so I can't say I'm surprised. But still, it's a shock.'

Norton exhales again. He can barely believe this.

'But anyway, the thing is,' Noel goes on, 'I left that folder on the bar in –'

'Yeah,' Norton says, 'it's OK, I've got it.'

'Well, I'm going to need it. Tonight. There are some things in it I want to check –'

'Look –'

'– for tomorrow morning.'

'Oh come on, Noel, come *on*.'

'*No.*'

‘What the fuck am I going to tell Ray Sullivan?’

‘I don’t know. Tell him the truth.’

‘Oh for –’

‘Look, Paddy, I’m sorry, but . . . it’s just not right.’

Norton stares out across Wicklow Street. On the other side some young women are walking past. Despite the cold, they are all wearing short, skimpy dresses, and despite the acres of flesh on display, thighs, shoulders, backs, there is nothing sexy or attractive about them. They look like a pack of strange animals, roving the plains in search of food and shelter. One of them is lagging behind, weaving drunkenly along the pavement. Norton thinks of his own daughter, pictures her here, like this, and a wave of emotion – unadulterated and operatic – washes over him. The Narolet does this sometimes, makes him a little weepy, leaves him exposed. But that’s fine, he likes it, looks forward to it even.

‘Paddy?’

Norton shakes his head. He looks at the dashboard, refocusing.

‘OK, OK,’ he says. ‘I’m not going to argue with you any more, Noel. Do what you want. Let’s meet someplace and you can pick it up.’

‘I can drop out to the house.’

‘No.’ Norton pauses here, closing one eye. ‘I’m still in town. We can meet halfway somewhere.’

‘Fine.’

They make an arrangement. The car park behind Morahan’s. In forty-five minutes.

‘See you then.’

‘Yeah.’

Norton holds the phone in his hand. It weighs a ton.

He never wanted this.

He's been in the property business for over thirty years – here and in the UK – and during that time he has put up countless hotels, apartment blocks, office complexes and a shopping centre or two. He has made a considerable reputation for himself, as well as a lot of friends, and a lot of money . . . so naturally he's not going to let some self-important little prick like Noel Rafferty flush all of that down the toilet –

Norton shakes his head.

– and especially not over something like *this* . . .

In a reflex movement, Norton brings a hand up to his chest, and winces.

He remains still, letting the seconds roll past – five seconds, ten seconds, fifteen seconds. What's the deal here? Is he just excited or are these actual palpitations? Is this a warning sign or is it the precursor to some kind of massive heart attack?

Who knows?

He waits some more, and it seems to pass.

He looks at his watch, and then back at his mobile. He calls Fitz's number again and waits.

He never wanted this. He really didn't.

'Yep?'

'We need to meet.'

'What? *When*?'

'Right now. In the next twenty minutes.'

5

Coming out of Isosceles, after the gig, after the minimalist repetitions and phase-shifting polyrhythms of Icelandic trio,

Barcode, Gina Rafferty is feeling transported. This is the first proper night out she's had in weeks, and although there is something ironic in the fact that the complex, patterned music actually reminds her of work, of computer code, of the alternating ones and zeroes they all toil so endlessly over in the office, she doesn't feel cheated or shortchanged. It's the same mechanism in each case, for sure – it's the language of order, the language of structure – but the context is quite different. So it'd be like comparing, say, legalese with poetry, the syntax of a contract with the metre of a sonnet . . .

Though the truth is, in *any* case, be it in a legal document or a poem – or a musical composition – Gina likes it, she likes order and structure.

Unapologetically so, in fact.

Which is probably just as well, given the attitude she's already picking up from these two guys she and her friend Sophie came with – not that she's in the least bit concerned about their huffing and sighing. Time was when she would have been mortified and felt she had to explain herself somehow, account for her opinions, even feign opinions she didn't have, but not anymore, not these days, and as they shuffle through the foyer now, she turns to one of them, the tall guy with the beard, and says, 'So, I thought that was pretty cool.'

'What?' the guy says, looking down at her. 'Jesus. No. I thought it was torture.'

The other guy laughs.

Gina rolls her eyes.

Torture? Why is she not surprised? She knew that Barcode wouldn't particularly be Sophie's bag, but she hadn't anticipated that these two guys – colleagues of Sophie's – would be such boneheads.

‘You know what it reminded me of?’ the guy with the beard is saying. ‘Of when I was a kid, at mass, having to sit there. It was fucking awful.’

‘Well,’ Gina says, not interested in hearing any more of this, and reaching into her pocket for her mobile, ‘I thought it was sublime.’

‘Sublime?’ the second guy says. ‘Come on, it was boring.’

With the music still echoing in her head – the subtle patterns, the mathematical precision, the clarity and grace – what’s the point of arguing, Gina thinks. After *awful* and *boring* she’s going to counter with words like *clarity* and *grace*?

‘Oh, what,’ she then says, ‘I suppose you’d prefer some boy band in white suits doing cover versions of Perry Como hits?’

‘Perry *who*?’

Turning away, Gina sees that she has two texts and a voicemail. The first text is from Beth, ‘CU 4 lnh @ 1?’, and the second – characteristically unabbreviated and with full punctuation – is from P.J., ‘Remember I’m in London tomorrow. Intermetric, at 10.30. I’ll call you after.’

When they get out onto Dame Street, the crowd starts breaking up and they’re able to move a little faster. Gina switches from holding the phone in front of her, staring at it as she walks, to holding it up to her ear.

The voicemail is from one of her sisters. ‘Received at 9.27 p.m.’ Pause. ‘Gina, it’s Yvonne. Oh God. Listen. Ring me back as soon as you can, will you? Something awful’s happened.’ Gina’s heart sinks. ‘I suppose I’d better tell you. Young Noel is after getting shot. He was in a pub somewhere.’ She pauses here, almost as if to give Gina a second or two to respond, to say, ‘Oh my God’, which she does. Yvonne then continues, ‘Look, I’d better tell you everything, he’s *dead*. It’s just . . .

awful. I'm heading over to Catherine's now. Sorry for telling you like this, but what else could I do? Call me.' That's it. When Gina looks up, she realises that she's not moving anymore and that Sophie and the two guys are already ten or fifteen paces ahead of her.

Sophie turns, and sees the shock on Gina's face.

'What's wrong?' She rushes back.

'It's my nephew,' Gina says, putting a hand up to her chest. 'I can't believe this. He's been shot dead.'

Sophie's eyes almost pop. 'What?'

Sophie is from Mount Merrion, not a place where people tend to get shot.

'This is . . . *awful*,' Gina says. 'I have to get out to my sister's.' She looks around, confused, still in shock.

'There's a taxi rank down here,' Sophie says, taking her by the arm. 'Come on.'

The two guys are waiting, but Sophie disposes of them with a quick remark that Gina doesn't hear.

They then walk in silence for a bit, cross at lights, looking left and right, concentrating on that. Eventually, Sophie asks Gina which sister it is.

'Catherine,' Gina says.

Sophie nods. After a pause she goes on, 'Your nephew? God. How old was he? I have one who's six and another one who's still in nappies.'

'Uh . . .' Gina scrambles in her head for an answer. 'He's only a few years younger than me. Twenty-five, I think, twenty-six.'

'Oh.'

'My sister had him when she was very young. It was . . .' She trails off here.

Gina is the youngest in the family – what used to be called

an afterthought, or even a mistake. She's only thirty-two, ten years younger than the next one up.

All of her siblings are in their forties.

Growing up, Gina could just about relate to Catherine and Michelle as sisters, but with Yvonne and Noel it was a little different. By the time she was only a year or two old they'd already left home and as a result she didn't see them that often, so they were really more like an aunt and an uncle to her. She loves them to bits, of course – but it still feels, even today, like they're from another generation.

'That's so *sad*,' Sophie says as they approach the taxi rank. 'Were you close to him?'

Gina is about to respond to this, but she stops. What does she say? The guy is dead.

She shakes her head.

She opens the back door of the taxi and leans against it. 'OK. Here we are.'

'Gina, do you want me to come along with you? As far as the house even?'

'No, you're grand, Soph. Thanks. I'll call you tomorrow.'

As Gina gets into the taxi, she waves back at Sophie.

'Dolanstown,' she says to the driver, and then gives him the full address.

The car pulls away from the rank, swings around and heads back up Dame Street. In order to avoid conversation with the driver, not that this is likely to work, Gina takes out her mobile and starts texting. She quickly rain-checks lunch with Beth, acknowledges P.J.'s message and then wonders – thumb poised, still staring at the display – if she should call Yvonne or just show up at Catherine's.

She looks out the window.

But what's Yvonne going to tell her on the phone that she didn't say in the message?

'Miserable night.'

See?

Gina turns, glances into the rearview mirror and meets the taxi driver's eyes.

'Yeah,' she says, and looks away.

That's all he's getting.

'You were out for a few jars yourself tonight, yeah?'

Oh God.

'Hhnn.'

She gets this a lot with taxi drivers, especially going home at night, but really, what do they expect her to say? Yeah, bud, I'm well locked, me, no self-control at all, so pull in anywhere that's convenient for you there and off we go?

'Town's fairly busy.'

'Hhnn.'

The taxi driver pauses, regrouping, and then, 'I see on the news there the Taoiseach's after putting his foot in it again.'

OK, OK, maybe she's wrong. Maybe it's not the erotic charge of her being a young woman on her own, in a short skirt, with drink taken, in *his* cab. Maybe he's just bored and trying to make conversation.

Whatever. But not tonight.

'If you don't mind,' she says, 'I'd prefer not to talk.'

'Oh,' he says.

Was that a little huffy? She stares at the back of his head. 'Thanks.'

'No, no,' he says, 'you're fine, you're fine.' But of course that won't do. After a moment, he has to add, 'No problem there,

miss. None at all. And no offence taken either. Whatever the customer wants. That's what I always say, always have, and I'm twenty years in this game.'

In order to shut himself up, he reaches down and flicks on his radio. There are speakers behind Gina and the music is quite loud. What's playing is some awful eighties thing she vaguely recognises – it's soft rock, FM, irredeemably lite.

What *did* the Taoiseach say? Suddenly she's curious.

But in the next moment she's back with the immediate reality of what's happened – her nephew, her sister.

For as long as she can remember, Gina's been hearing stories about young Noel, about how he was always getting into trouble and breaking his mother's heart. Catherine raised him on her own (with financial help from their brother), and she did her best in difficult circumstances, but the kid was undeniably a handful. He was hyperactive, rebellious and physically very big – so much so that by the time he hit his teens he was pretty much out of control. He got into all the usual shit, joyriding, shoplifting, burglary and, of course, drugs.

Over the next few years, whenever the sisters met, an increasingly weary Catherine usually went out of her way to avoid the subject, and since Gina herself was pretty busy, doing her diploma in computer programming and then starting work, she hardly ever saw her nephew and heard very little about what he was up to. Though lately his name *has* been cropping up in the papers – and most recently in a *Sunday World* article she saw about the massive profits being made in DVD piracy.

Biting her lower lip, Gina now looks up and around. St Patrick's Cathedral flits past on the left, a new apartment complex on the right.

She's unsure what to think – though really, in Dublin, getting shot in a pub can mean only one thing, can't it?

As if to confirm this, the song on the radio finishes abruptly and a news bulletin comes on.

'All the latest for Dublin at eleven,' the announcer says, sounding as if he's about fifteen and has just drunk a quadruple espresso. 'A man in his mid-twenties has been gunned down in the beer garden of a south-side pub. It happened just before nine o'clock this evening. Witnesses claim the gunman fired three shots into the victim at point-blank range and then made his escape on a motorbike. The incident has all the hallmarks of a gangland killing –'

Gina closes her eyes.

'– and it is believed that the dead man, who hasn't been named yet, was known to the Gardaí.'

Oh God. Poor Catherine.

Gina shifts around in the seat and tries to shut out the rest of the bulletin. She'd like to ask the driver to turn the radio off, or at least to turn the volume down, but she feels she's used up any goodwill she might have had with him. She also knows that this is ridiculous. But they're turning at the KCR now and moving pretty fast – so why rock the boat? When she arrives at Catherine's house she's going to need all the composure and self-possession she can muster.

After the sports results, weather report and an ad break the music comes back on, still eighties, but this time a little less grating.

A few minutes later, the cab turns into the road where Catherine lives, a small crescent of semi-detached houses built in the fifties – and barely half a mile from where Gina, her sisters and Noel were all born and grew up. Gina hasn't been

out here for a while and she soon remembers why. Despite growing up in Dolanstown, she has always found the design and layout of the place – as with so many of Dublin’s suburban housing estates – to be soulless and oppressive.

At night it’s not so bad, she thinks. It’s dark, street dark, and the atmosphere is a little different.

‘This is fine,’ she tells the driver, ‘just here on the left.’

The cab pulls up.

Gina pays and gets out. It’s colder than it seemed earlier, and she’s suddenly conscious of what she’s wearing – short denim skirt, floral print top and pin-striped jacket – all fine for wandering around town in, but a little bonkers for out here, for this.

There’s nothing she can do about it now, though – not that Catherine is going to register what Gina, or anyone else for that matter, is wearing. But Yvonne or Michelle might, and the last thing she wants to see is *them* exchanging glances.

Look at madame.

Is it Gina’s fault that they have no social lives anymore? Is it her fault that they are both stuck in a time warp? Is it her fault that they never got out of Dolanstown?

But she’s being ridiculous again, and she knows it, and she knows why, too. It’s displacement. Because this is going to be really hard. The level of Catherine’s grief will be unimaginable. No one will be able to help her. No one will have anything more to offer her than a hug and a few platitudes.

Approaching the house, Gina takes a deep breath.

The first thing she notices is an SUV parked in the driveway.

This can only be Noel’s.

She rolls her eyes. Every time she sees Noel, which of course isn’t that often, he’s driving something different.

As she's passing the SUV, she peers into its tinted windows. She sees nothing except her own reflection. Up ahead, the hall door of the house opens and Noel himself comes out. He's wearing a heavy overcoat and appears to be in a hurry. When he spots Gina, he rushes up to her, takes her by the hand and kisses her on the cheek.

'How are you, sweetheart?'

'I'm OK. How's Catherine?'

He makes a face, shakes his head, shrugs his shoulders – each time about to say something, each time about to make an assessment, each time defeated.

Gina nods along.

Eventually, Noel says, 'The Guards have just left. They say she can't go in to identify the body until the morning.'

'Which means it's going to be a long night.'

'Yeah, looks like it.'

They both shake their heads.

Gina then says, 'So what happened? Do we know anything?'

'No. I made a couple of calls a while ago. No one knows a thing.' He pauses. 'You do realise what he's been up to for the last few years?'

'Well yeah, I read the papers,' Gina says. 'But it's not like anyone ever talks about it.'

'No. I suppose. Catherine had a hard time with it, understandably.' He looks around, shivers from the cold and turns back to face Gina. 'But anyway, from what I've heard it was unexpected.'

'Weird.'

'Yeah.'

Noel then looks Gina up and down. 'Jesus, are you not freezing in that get-up?'

She nods *yes*, then says, 'I was in town at a gig. Going on to a party. What do you want?'

'No, I'm just saying.' He looks at her again. 'Here, do you want my coat?'

He starts taking it off. She puts a hand out to stop him.

'No,' she laughs. 'Are you mad?'

This is so Noel.

He shuffles the coat back on.

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, I'm grand.'

He reaches out and strokes her cheek.

'You're my baby sister,' he says, 'and I love you. I wish I saw you more often. Are you *all right*?'

'Yeah, of course.'

'How's the software business?'

'It's OK,' she says. It feels weird to be talking like this, casually, as if nothing has happened. 'We're under a lot of pressure at the moment.'

'Yeah?'

'Well, with the downturn and all.'

Gina and her business partner, P.J., run Lucius, a small software-development company. They started up with some decent venture capital behind them, but that was back when the economy still seemed unassailable. Now, after two years, they have yet to launch a product on the market, and P.J.'s trip to London is an attempt to drum up some potential customer interest.

'It's a living,' she adds, half defensively. 'Not that my bank manager is too convinced.'

Noel squints his eyes at this.

'*What?*' Gina says.

‘Are you all right for money?’

She nods. But that’s not enough, apparently. ‘Yeah, I am.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Noel,’ she says, ‘that was a *joke*.’

Though actually it wasn’t. Since Lucius started up, they’ve been working on the same software package – a suite of integrated data-management tools – but their burn rate has been pretty startling of late. In fact, the VCs are beginning to get alarmed, which is quite serious, because if they pull the plug now there won’t be any salaries at the end of the month. There won’t be any jobs.

For anyone.

‘Look, I’m *fine*,’ she adds. ‘I am, really. Thanks.’

Noel shrugs his shoulders.

Gina raps her knuckles gently against the side of the SUV. ‘So, where are you off to?’

Noel exhales and looks exasperated all of a sudden. ‘Oh, I’ve got to go and pick something up in town. I’m meeting someone.’ He glances at his watch. ‘I’ll be back, though. Half an hour, forty-five minutes.’

‘Whatever happened to office hours?’

He snorts at this. ‘You must be joking.’

‘I suppose I am. But listen,’ she says, ‘Richmond Plaza? It’s amazing. Really. I look down the quays at it every morning when I come out of my building. It’s transforming the skyline.’

‘Well, that’s the idea,’ Noel says. The firm he’s a partner in, BCM, are the structural engineers on this docklands development. ‘Let’s hope we make it to the finishing line.’

Gina furrows her brow. ‘Why wouldn’t you? Isn’t it almost finished?’

‘It is, yeah, of course. And we *will*.’ He looks out, over her shoulder, hesitating. ‘It’s just that, well, you know what it’s like these days. And you wouldn’t believe the headaches involved.’ He looks at his watch again, and adds, ‘*This*, for instance.’

Gina notices for the first time how gaunt Noel looks. He is pale and has bags under his eyes.

‘And what *is* this exactly?’

‘Oh, you don’t want to know, believe me. It’s a situation, engineering stuff, an unholy bloody mess.’ He waves a hand in the air, as if to magic it all away.

Gina leans forward slightly. ‘Noel, are *you* OK?’

He nods vigorously. ‘I’m fine, I’m fine, Jesus. Now go on, get inside or you’ll catch your death. And I’ll see you in a while.’

‘OK.’

But neither of them moves.

Noel then reaches out and takes her by the arm. ‘I know these are awful circumstances,’ he says, staring into her eyes, ‘and let’s face it, the next couple of days are going to be fairly hectic, but maybe at some point we can sit down and have a really good chat, yeah?’

‘Yeah, I’d like that.’

And she would, too. Every time she sees Noel she remembers how much she likes him.

‘Great,’ Noel says, giving her arm a quick squeeze. ‘I’ll look forward to it.’ He then produces car keys from his pocket. Gina steps back and watches him getting into the SUV. As he pulls out of the driveway, he looks around, beeps the horn and waves.

Gina waves back, turns and heads for the front door.