

1

Cathy was expecting the left jab; it was the speed of the kick that surprised her. He was bulked up, but he was fast.

Bastard.

She came right back, caught him under the chin with an uppercut that stunned him; her left hook followed it, then an explosive push kick right into the middle of his chest guard. He was still staggering as, spinning around, her back kick sent him towards the raw brick wall where he crumpled with a grunt.

‘What the fuck’s going on in here?’ The Boss’s voice echoed around the high-ceilinged gym, drowning the bass beat of Spin 1038, the Falls Road in every vowel. ‘I’m in the khazi for five minutes and all fucking hell breaks loose?’

Shaking her arms out, Cathy turned away from him, hiding her grin of satisfaction. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the three lads who had been egging their mate to take her on shuffling nervously from side to side. *They were right to be worried.*

‘Nothing, Boss.’ Like choir boys. Only the lad on the floor was quiet, winded, struggling to his feet.

Turning back to them, shoving a stray corkscrew of raven hair from her face, Cathy smirked. One of them had had the cheek to leer at her cropped black Lycra top and loose wide-legged exercise pants, the waistband rolled down to her slim



hips revealing the scars on her stomach that were still angry even after all these months. She would have given him the finger if she hadn't been wearing boxing gloves. *Like they'd never seen a girl in a gym before.*

Niall McIntyre drew himself up to his full height, all five foot six of it, put his hands on his hips and gave her the full sergeant major routine, complete with a look that would have made litmus bleed.

'You, girl, have got the semis at the end of the month. Where's your safety gear? You've enough damage done, without breaking another rib.' Turning to the lads, his pointed finger rammed home every word. 'I don't know what you've been allowed to get away with in Tallaght, but there will be no arsing about in my gym, do you hear? This isn't junior infants. You want to improve your game, it's by *my* rules. Understood?'

They nodded like five-year-olds caught on the rob. For a small man he could be pretty scary. Unshaven, a rat face cut from granite, he was a Belfast Catholic who'd spent his life in the British army. Knew how to make it sting. The lads kept their eyes on the ground. They weren't much older than seventeen, their fake tans bleached right out by the overhead fluorescents, angry tattoos battling for space on their arms and chests – Dublin's finest. They looked good, Cathy would give them that, but she was sure they were bulked up on steroids and that was a fool's game.

'You know who she is?' McIntyre's voice was sharp. They didn't look like they were going to answer, but he didn't give them a chance. '*This* is Cat Connolly.' He didn't need to add three times Women's National Full-Contact Kick-boxing champion and decorated member of An Garda Síochána. As soon as



he said her name she saw the recognition in their faces, watched their expressions change like the wind, from respect to hatred, like she had some contagious disease. Where they came from it didn't matter how good you were in the ring, cops were scum, the enemy. And McIntyre knew it, would have her sparring with them before the end of the week when they'd only have one thing on their minds – drawing blood. *That was one way to get match fit.*

'Bastard . . .' Cathy muttered it under her breath, shaking her head.

'Right, if you boys can't spar without getting into shit, grab yourselves some ropes: twenty skips, twenty press-ups, nineteen skips, nineteen tucks. Keep going till you're back to one. Cat, you're with me. Where the hell's Sarah Jane? She should be here by now. She's not working in that restaurant tonight, is she?'

Cathy shook her head, 'She never does Monday evenings – even The Rookery is quiet on a Monday.' Cathy glanced at the clock high on the gym wall. It was after seven o'clock.

Where the hell *was* Sarah Jane?

It wasn't like her to be late. Sarah Jane was always early. One of the most organised people Cathy knew, Sarah Jane managed to juggle a part-time job waitressing at one of the city's swankiest restaurants, study for her masters, fit in training and still get all her assignments in on time. Cathy put that down to her being something close to a genius. Sarah Jane denied she was bright, reckoned she got As in everything because she worked hard, that she was ordinary, just like everyone else. That had made Cathy laugh. Cathy knew *she* was the one who was ordinary; her father was a barman, her mum had worked three jobs to keep her and her brothers in shoe leather – *that* was ordinary. Sarah



Jane's dad was a Norwegian Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist and her mother had grown up in one of the smallest villages in Ireland, but had ended up the flame-haired poster girl for Greenpeace. That was going somewhere else well clear of ordinary.

She pressed her tongue against her gum shield. Sarah Jane was better organised than Cathy would ever be, which made it weird that she hadn't turned up for the best bit of their whole week – the bit when they got to have a laugh with The Boss and beat the feck out of each other. Cathy trained six days a week, but sparring with Sarah Jane gave her a chance to focus on technique rather than power. Everyone needed a training buddy, and Sarah Jane was hers. In the past few months, though, with the championships on the horizon, she'd stepped it up, and was finally feeling she'd regained her form after the explosion that had nearly killed her almost a year ago. And Sarah Jane had been brilliant, was loving improving her own fitness alongside Cathy's, keeping to her pace.

There wasn't a day that went by when Cathy didn't wish she'd curbed her curiosity all those months ago. It had been a routine break-in until she'd found those bones, the tiny grey shards a whisper of something much more ominous hidden deep within the hem of a vintage wedding dress. The story that had unravelled had gotten far bigger and more complex than any of them had ever expected, and while she might be heading towards match fitness again now, she didn't know if she'd ever be quite the same person she'd been before.

She hadn't known Sarah Jane that well then – she'd been the year below Cathy in school. It was a small school, so they'd known each other, had played on the same hockey team, but



hadn't been close friends. Then Cathy had gone straight into the Guards. Actually she'd been the only girl in her year not to go to uni or college, but she hadn't been able to wait. She knew she'd learn more on the job in a day than she'd learn in a year of a degree course, and she could study at night – which was exactly what she had done.

Cathy was sure 'the accident', as half the people in her life seemed to call it, was one of the reasons she and Sarah Jane clicked when they'd bumped into each other again at the gym. There weren't many people who understood Cathy's world, and Sarah Jane had the same problem. Cathy's working class family and private girls' school education, her boxing, getting shot on the job, made her different. Sarah Jane's norm was in a place where being held at gunpoint on your tenth birthday or being evacuated by helicopter was just a thing that happened on holiday. But then she'd spent her school holidays with her dad when he was assigned to the Middle East – and as a journalist he was never really 'on holiday'. Sarah Jane found it hilarious, if ironically so, that he attracted trouble like Cathy seemed to. But she never called the bomb blast an accident.

It hadn't been a fecking accident.

A Russian mafia don called Kuteli had organised a hit on her, pure and simple; had deliberately tried to kill her and there was nothing accidental about it.

Cathy shook her head, still thinking about McIntyre's question. 'When I saw her on Friday she said she'd see me here tonight. I was working all weekend.' Cathy felt McIntyre looking at her hard as she tried to hide the flicker of concern in her voice. 'I don't know why she didn't ring if she needed to cancel.'



His tone softened fractionally. ‘Well she’s late, and you can’t train without a sparring partner. What does she think we’re running here, a holiday camp?’

‘Maybe she’s got car trouble . . .’

‘I’ll give her car trouble. I keep telling her that Micra is a heap of shite. We’ll do some pad work instead. Let’s see you warming up properly. Bet you didn’t think of that before you belted Twinkle Toes there?’

Cathy shook her head, grinning. McIntyre was a total bastard, but he was the best in the business and he’d shaped her from a shy ten-year-old to a champion. He was her friend and mentor, a part of her family. And he’d been the one who had put in the extra time, coaching her every day, helping her to focus on getting back in the game as she fought her way back to fitness.

He didn’t know the whole story, not like Dawson O’Rourke, her DI, but she’d never be able to thank McIntyre enough for his steely determination, his refusal to let her give up. The blast had left her on life support, had almost derailed her career as a detective and as a boxer, and had murdered the new life within her. Back then, before the bomb, she might have been confused, uncertain about the future, but it had been her life, her baby, and that loss would never go away. It was a pain deep inside that could still ambush her. But in the aftermath she’d learned what amazing friends she had. Between them, O’Rourke and McIntyre had shown her how to survive.

And now, after the bomb, after everything, she was heading for the top again. Recovery had taken longer than she’d ever thought it could – months and months – but she was physically ready now and she was going to take her title back. And that feeling of being in control physically was helping her mentally



too. The scars ran deep, and sometimes she wondered if they would ever heal. They affected her when she least expected it, her emotions seesawing from extreme anger to the darkest despair, triggered by something she saw on TV, at work, or sometimes simply by hearing a song on the radio. One of the things she'd had to learn since it happened was how to become a very good actress, hiding how she really felt, trying to keep everything on a level, outwardly at least. At work there was no room for mistakes, and if she wanted to stay in the job she had to find ways to cope. Nobody wanted to hear her whining or to have to pick up the pieces when she flew off the handle.

It had only happened once; she'd gone back to work too early, of course. She might have been physically mended – after months of surgery and plastic surgery, physio and rehab, after running hundreds of miles, she was fit enough to persuade them she could get back out there – but her first week of nights had been a disaster. A heavily pregnant teenager had been beaten up by her boyfriend, and as she lay rolling in agony on the hall floor, waiting for the ambulance, her baby, her *wanted* baby slipping away, the boyfriend had made some smart comment and Cathy had snapped. It had taken two officers to haul her off him.

He wouldn't be hitting a woman again anytime soon.

Grabbing a skipping rope, Cathy kept one eye on the clock as she started her warm-up, her bare feet silent on the padded matting as the rope whirled. Press-ups next. Squats. Star jumps. The thick black minute hand ticked on, shaking with each increment. *Where was Sarah Jane?* She'd hardly have forgotten. They trained together every Monday night, the only exception being if Cathy was on a case and couldn't get away from work. Cathy



glanced at the double swing doors leading to the changing rooms, looking for the bright flash of Sarah Jane's smile through the wired glass. *She would have phoned if she was sick, or had been delayed.*

Jumping up, Cathy started her stretches. Maybe Sarah Jane's phone was dead again.

By 7.45 p.m. she still hadn't shown up.

'Come on, girl, you're not concentrating!' McIntyre grabbed the punch bag out of Cathy's reach and slapped the side hard, the sound explosive, ricocheting off the brick walls like a car backfiring. It made her start more than McIntyre could know. But then maybe he did. He'd heard bombs go off more than once. As she tried to still her heart rate, the Tallaght boys looked up from their squats, startled. Out of the corner of her eye Cathy could see them smirking, enjoying her getting bawled at.

'You've got to focus. Remember, eyes on the prize. Let me hear it.'

'Jesus, Boss.'

'You worrying about where Sarah Jane is isn't going to get this session over any quicker. Let me hear it.'

Cathy danced backwards, her gloves beneath her chin, steady-ing her breathing. 'McIntyre's mantra', Sarah Jane called it . . . Well, he asked for it . . . She smashed her glove into the bag. Left, right . . .

'I *will* be national champion.'

McIntyre steadied the bag as he took the force of the punch through it. Cathy was already saturated with sweat from the session, droplets flying as she went in with a right uppercut.

'I *will* be European champion . . .'



Left uppercut. She didn't look at McIntyre, but could hear him exhale with each strike. It would be a while before she was ready for the Europeans, but he was all about positive thinking and she knew it worked. He'd taught her how to focus, taught her how to win, and that's what she was going to do.

'And the rest, girl, let me hear it, you won't be at this your whole life – what else?'

Cathy danced back again, catching her breath, punched hard 'I *will* get my masters.' Her push kick sent the bag into McIntyre's chest.

'What are you working so hard at, girl? What do you want? Let me hear it!'

Hard again with a left jab, another left jab, followed by a right. 'Forensic psychology. A first.'

'And?'

She said it under her breath, conscious of the audience, 'I *will* be the first female Garda profiler.'

McIntyre grunted, 'Good. That's good, girl. Put it here.' He pushed the bag towards her, bracing himself behind it, 'Just watch that right, you're dropping a bit.'

From across the gym Cathy could hear laughter, then the choir boys chimed in, their voices high pitched, 'I do believe in fairies, I do, I do.'

McIntyre turned on them, his voice echoing through the styro-foam ceiling, 'Showers. Now. All of you.'

Scattering like rats, they didn't have to be told twice. It had been a long time since Cathy had seen anyone move that fast.

'Now, girl, a couple more for me. Push kick, back kick.' Cathy caught the glint in McIntyre's eye. She danced back, smiling to herself, imagined the lippy one's face on the bag, and smashed



her left foot straight at it, pivoting to kick the bag again with her right foot, putting all her weight behind it.

‘Not bad, girl. Not bad.’ McIntyre pursed his lips as Cathy pulled at the Velcro on her gloves with her teeth. ‘Keep this up and you’re in with a real shot at getting your title back. That Jordan one is your only worry.’ Striding to the benches running along the wall, McIntyre picked up her towel and threw it at her. She caught it one handed, rubbing the sweat off her neck and chest, spitting out her gum shield.

‘Her brother’s inside for rape; she alibied him. Tried to, anyway.’

McIntyre raised his eyebrows, ‘All the more reason for you to give her a pasting.’

Cathy let a glimmer of a smile creep out. McIntyre had trained all of her brothers, even Tomás, who spent more time at the poker table than in the gym, and Pete who had had to fit classes around school and the early-morning sandwich run that had grown into a restaurant empire. Aidan, the eldest, had gone into the job ahead of her, but he’d learned as much in the ring as he had in uniform on the street.

Before Cathy could answer, her phone rang.

‘Bet that’s Sarah Jane . . .’ Dashing over to the bench where she’d tossed the phone, Cathy could feel her abs burning. Sparring partner or not, McIntyre had given her a hard time. Flipping open the cover, she was about to answer when it stopped ringing.

‘Damn.’

Behind her McIntyre was tidying up, pairing the spare gloves on the shelves beside the weights, untangling the skip-ping ropes.





Cathy checked her missed calls. Sarah Jane's mum's number flashed up. Cathy's stomach suddenly felt hollow.

'If it's Sarah Jane, you just tell her her organisational skills are slipping.'

Cathy looked up, frowning, her blue eyes clouded, 'No, no, it wasn't her. It was her mum.'

She punched out 171 with her thumb and put the phone to her ear. The message was short, Sarah Jane's mother's voice catching at the edges like she was trying not to panic:

'Cathy, when you get this, can you call me? I've been trying Sarah Jane's phone all afternoon and her dad couldn't get hold of her yesterday. He tried to call me earlier but we got cut off – they've had some sort of row. I really need to talk to her . . . is she with you?'

McIntyre caught the look on Cathy's face.

'What's up, girl?'

'I don't know. I really don't know.'

Cathy hit instant call back. It only took seconds to connect.

Sarah Jane's mum sounded breathless as she answered. 'Cathy? Have you heard from her?'

'No.' Cathy paused, not wanting to panic Oonagh Hansen any more. 'Not yet, she didn't come to training.'

Sarah Jane's mother's intake of breath was instantaneous, the tone of her voice unmistakable, 'Oh God. You have to find her. She . . . Her dad said . . .' The words were tumbling over themselves . . . 'He said . . . Ted said . . . he spoke to her on Friday. He's stuck up a mountain in Syria and the line was really bad, but I think he said she'd got a lead on a story. He told her to leave it alone, that it was too dangerous for a student, they had a row about it . . .'



‘I’ll do my best. I’ll call you as soon as I find her. Try not to worry, I’m sure she’s buried in an essay at home and hasn’t realised the time . . .’

‘Please, Cathy. Please find her . . . Call me as soon as you can. I’m going to see if I can get up to Dublin in the morning, I just have to get a lift to Killarney and I’ll get the train . . . but I don’t know if I should stay down here where she can get hold of me . . .’

The call dropped.

For a moment Cathy looked blankly at the phone, trying to gather her thoughts. Deep inside, a feeling of worry uncurled and stretched its claws. What on earth could she be working on that she hadn’t talked to Cathy about? Was it something that had only just happened? One thing she knew for sure: Sarah Jane would never miss training. No matter what. Cathy swung around to relay the conversation to McIntyre.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

2

She might have left the gym behind, but there was a fight going on in Cathy's head as she drove towards Sarah Jane's house. One part of her was forcing herself to relax, to concentrate on the heavy traffic as she headed down the M50, tail lights blazing red through the darkness and drizzle. The other part of her was making her hands grip the steering wheel of her grey Mini so tight it hurt.

Sarah Jane was never late. That was it. That was just it. She was never late and she never didn't call. The words rolled around Cathy's head like ball bearings. Cathy knew you couldn't never not do something, but she knew what she meant, *Sarah Jane just never didn't turn up.*

And she'd had a row with her dad. On Friday. Three whole days ago.

One thing she and Sarah Jane had in common was what McIntyre called sheer bloody-mindedness. Tell either of them not to do something and it was guaranteed to have the opposite effect. Sarah Jane was striving so hard to get a really fabulous degree, to make a name for herself in her own right, to prove that her dad could be proud of her, that she was sometimes even more headstrong than Cathy – and that was saying something. But that was why they got on so well: Cathy had been



known to jump in before she checked the depth too; was getting a reputation for getting herself into deep water, into situations that would have finished off most people – they understood each other.

Cathy had realised Sarah Jane idolised her dad from the first time they'd really got chatting. But this argument, over a story?

For Sarah Jane's mum, panic mode was the default response to any problem – she was infamous for getting into a total stew about everything. Perhaps it was being so far away in rural Kerry that was part of the problem, but if there was a power cut, Oonagh Hansen was on the phone to Sarah Jane in hysterics. It was entirely possible, Cathy rationalised, trying to keep calm herself, that Oonagh's interpretation of what had actually been said or not said was way off the mark. Cathy took a deep breath. But that still didn't explain where the hell Sarah Jane was.

The minute Cathy had got out of the shower at the gym she'd called all their mutual friends. Cathy knew that Sarah Jane had a pile of assignments to catch up on, that she'd been working in the restaurant covering the lunch shift yesterday. They'd talked about it on Friday morning – she remembered Sarah Jane's words as she'd raised her voice over the clamour of the canteen:

I'm working Friday afternoon and Sunday but I told Billy I couldn't do Saturday. No way. I've got three features and another article to do and I need to research a load of stuff. I'll see you at the gym on Monday evening. I'll be in the library all day.'

Leaning on her locker, Cathy had tapped her phone on her teeth while trying to work out who to call next. Someone must have heard from her or seen her today. Even if she was spending the day in the library, why hadn't she called if she was going to



miss training? Maybe her phone battery was dead, maybe her car wouldn't start, or her assignment had taken longer than she thought?

That was a lot of maybes.

If her phone was dead she could have emailed from her laptop . . .

Cathy's gut twisted again. Why did she have such a bad feeling about this? Was she jumping to conclusions? Maybe . . . There was that word again.

And if Cathy had learned anything during her six years in the job, it was that you didn't do maybe. Maybe didn't stand up in court. Maybe was about speculation, not evidence.

Sarah Jane's house didn't have a landline phone anymore, and Cathy didn't have the numbers of any of Sarah Jane's housemates . . . or did she? She didn't have their numbers in her contact list, but she did have a text from one of them, Slug. God only knew how he'd got her number, but he'd texted once looking for advice from her brother Aidan – *looking for a favour, more like . . .*

Scrolling back through her messages, Cathy prayed she hadn't deleted it. She rarely deleted anything, this was her own version of OCD, an obsession with keeping data . . . She spotted it and hit call.

Not surprisingly, Slug wasn't quite with it, and it took him a few minutes to work out who she was.

'Sarah Jane? Nope, not seen her since . . .' His pause was too long, made Cathy want to reach into the phone and grab him by the neck.

'Since?'

She'd prompted him, battling to keep the desperation out of her voice.

'I'm pretty sure she was here last night. I was on the Xbox but I think I heard the door slam. Haven't seen her since I got up.'

'When was that?'

'About three or four maybe.'

Who the feck got up at three o'clock in the afternoon? Cathy kept her thoughts to herself. 'Is she there now?'

'I think maybe she went out.'

'What time was that?'

'I dunno, she's not here now.'

Helpful.

It only took Cathy a second to decide what to do. Maybe Sarah Jane had left a note on her calendar about a meeting, or something on her desk that would provide an explanation.

'I'm coming over. If you see her, tell her I'm looking for her, will you?'

'OK.'

Cathy gripped the steering wheel more tightly. Something wasn't right, something big. Had to be. What on earth would make her miss training without getting in touch? Had she landed an interview with someone at the last minute and forgotten? Unlikely, but when she got an idea into her head she just couldn't see anything else. Which sometimes caused friction with her dad – because he was exactly the same. If anyone needed tunnel vision to get his job done, it was Ted Hansen. If he started thinking for one second about the stuff around the edges, about what might happen when he was out in the field reporting from some war-torn part of Africa or Syria, where he was now, he'd never leave his apartment overlooking Central Park.

Oh Jesus, please don't let anything have happened to her. Sarah Jane was her best friend, they had a connection. Cathy could feel cold sweat on her back. But all Cathy's instincts were telling her she should be worried, and Cathy had good reason to know her instincts were good. It was her instincts that had changed her career path one long hot summer.

The sound of Maroon 5's 'This Love', playing at full volume on someone's stereo down the terrace, the smell of sausages on a bar-beque, of hot dry earth, parched by three months of real summer heat. She'd been twelve years old, sitting on the low wall outside their house, half reading her magazine. She'd looked up to see a little girl on her own, lost and lonely, vulnerable and on the verge of panic, the tears starting to fall. And a man striding purposefully across the parched green towards her, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up to conceal his face.

Later the Guards had told her that the little girl was only four and the man had a string of previous convictions for assaults on children.

She hadn't thought about the dangers then, that the man could have been armed, that he wasn't the type a twelve-year-old should challenge. Instead she'd taken off towards the girl, shouting at her to run, yelling at her brothers to come and help. That had been the day she'd decided to follow in her big brother Aidan's footsteps and become a member of An Garda Síochána. That was the day that had changed her life.

One night over a few pints after a late shift, Aidan had told O'Rourke all about it. It had just been the three of them in the corner of the pub, the doors locked, the barman wiping down the counter further along the mahogany bar. O'Rourke had raised his eyebrows, his 'She hasn't changed' said with amusement as



his eyes had met hers across the creamy head of his Guinness. She'd glared back at him, trying to mask her reaction to his stare, one that seemed to look deep inside her, the underlying tone, teasing, one he saved for her. He was right, she hadn't changed. There were times when you had to get involved, to make other people's business your business, and her gut was telling her that this was one of them.

Cathy slipped the Mini down a gear as she headed up the ramp off the M50 towards Cherrywood, the traffic lights ahead of her changing. She was getting the same feeling now that she'd had way back then on the garden wall, that same feeling that something wasn't right. She'd had it again when she'd entered the bedroom in Dalkey and seen the cream silk of a wedding dress tangled amongst Zoe Grant's clothes, a wedding dress that had turned out to have a grisly secret hidden in the hem . . . But that was history, and this was the present.

It was bizarre how she and Sarah Jane had clicked. They'd bumped into each other at the gym in Dún Laoghaire after how many years? Five? The digital locks on their lockers had both failed at the same time and Sarah Jane had gone to get one of the staff to open them. They'd got chatting while they waited for rescue, laughing about girls from school they were still in touch with, comparing notes on what they'd done since they left. Before they'd even realised they'd both be studying in DCU that September, Sarah Jane in her final year of her masters in journalism, Cathy starting her masters part-time in forensic psychology, juggling her lectures with her job, they'd arranged to train together.

The traffic lights changed to green, the vehicles in front of her sluggish as they moved off. *What was it with the bloody*



traffic in this city? Sarah Jane lived on the south side of Dublin, had taken over her parents' old house when her dad moved back to New York and her mum went to find herself with her brushes and paints in rural County Kerry. It was only about ten minutes from Cathy's own shared rented house in Shankill, a stone's throw from Michael's Hospital.

Hospital. Had Sarah Jane had an accident? She was a terrible driver, but she was pretty safe – it was the other motorists she drove mad, crawling below the speed limit.

Bad news travels fast. Her housemate – although technically her landlord – Decko's favourite phrase.

Glancing in the rear-view mirror, Cathy activated the hands-free phone set integrated into her dashboard and scrolled through her most recent dialled numbers. She hit the call button.

It took Decko a few minutes to answer, the sounds of the custody office in the Bridewell Garda Station filling the void as he caught up with what she was saying, 'Slow down, Cat. Sarah Jane's missing? She'll be fine. Bad news—'

Cathy cut him off, would have laughed if she'd been feeling less sick, 'But it's not like her. Can you run her plate, see if her car's been involved in an accident?'

'Christ, Cat, you know PULSE shows every log-in. I need a better reason than that she missed training, it's not a notifiable offence.'

'Decko . . .' It came out more panicky than she'd expected.

'All right, all right. Give me a minute. What's her reg?'

'It's 07 D 80305, a silver Micra. Sarah Jane Hansen, Royal Avenue, Dún Laoghaire.' Cathy reeled off the number. Car registrations were like people's names when you were in the job, were



just something you remembered. The year of manufacture, the county – the Irish system made it easy. But then in this job you were trained to be highly observant. Attention to detail could save your life.

‘Got it.’ She could hear Decko tapping at his keyboard as he continued. ‘Where are you?’

‘In the car. Ring me back. I’m on my way to her house but the traffic’s crap, I’m going to be at least another fifteen minutes. I know there’s something wrong, Dec, I just know it.’

‘OK. I’m on it. J.P.’s working tonight. I’ll get him to meet you there. But honestly, Cat, bad news travels fast.’

He was right of course. Bad news always got to you before good. But knowing that didn’t slow Cathy’s heart rate.

As she turned into Royal Avenue, lights glowed from the elegant Georgian houses on each side of the open green. Across the far end, facing her, was a row of substantial 1930s semis; Sarah Jane’s house was on the corner. There was no sign of J.P. yet. Between herself and her three housemates, their stations covered a good chunk of Dublin city from the Bridewell to Blackrock and up into the mountains. Dún Laoghaire was her and J.P.’s patch.

Cathy swung right, around the end of the green, and pulled up outside number thirty-two, yanking on the handbrake. Slamming the door of the Mini behind her, the sound ricocheting across the square, Cathy was across the broad pavement and heading through the wrought-iron gate, held permanently open, and across the lawn before the sound had died.

Pausing outside the glazed porch long enough to catch her breath, she hit the doorbell. Needle-like darts of rain headed down the back of her neck. Yanking the hood of her black sweat



top up over her head, she lifted her hand to hammer on the glass, her voice raised, 'Christ, can't you hear the bell?'

Inside the porch, the front door swung open and the sounds of car wheels screeching and bullets flying reached her. Head shaven, shirt off, his tattoos on full display, Slug looked at Cathy like she'd beamed in from the planet Lunatic. Cathy banged on the glass again with the heel of her hand, 'Hurry up!'

Shoving an Xbox controller into his jeans pocket, Slug stepped reluctantly into the porch and pulled back the sliding door, opening his mouth to speak over the racket of what sounded like Grand Theft Auto coming from inside the house. But Cathy didn't wait to hear what he had to say. Instead she pushed past him and ran up the stairs two at a time, her Nikes pounding the pale green stair carpet.

'Sarah Jane?'

Calling out as she swung onto the landing, dominated by a mountain bike and piles of dirty washing, Cathy almost tripped over a skateboard abandoned at the top of the stairs. The unvarnished wooden door to Sarah Jane's room was closed. Cathy knew it was her parents' old bedroom, the big one at the front of the house. In a stride Cathy was at the door, her hand raised to knock.

But there was no need.

The door wasn't closed.

It had been pulled firmly to, to make it look like it was closed, but Cathy could see indentations in the soft wood beside the Yale lock, where it had been levered open. When Sarah Jane had started letting the other rooms in the house her dad had insisted everyone had their own door key, for privacy – and safety.

'Oh holy feck.'

Behind her, Slug arrived at the top of the stairs, the sounds from downstairs continuing like they were inside an arcade.

‘What’s the panic?’

Cathy glanced back at him, fighting to keep her voice level.

‘It’s been jemmied. Looks like a crowbar.’