



# Prologue

MIST DRIFTED OVER the frozen ground. Dawn was breaking. A low winter sun skirted the treetops. The marshland lay still, the reed beds dusted with frost. To the south, the Thames curled through the landscape, rippling over the mudflats where its flow met the incoming tide. Beyond the horizon, London began to stir as the city woke to a new day.

The dogs were out in front, their owner following behind, still warm from his bed, shattering ice in the puddles with his heavy boots. Beyond the entrance to the nature reserve, a car was parked in the lane, two wheels in the drainage ditch, listing like a shipwreck under the bare branches of the sycamores. At first the dog walker thought the car was abandoned, by joyriders perhaps, or a drunk driver. Seeing there was no damage, no broken glass or dented panels, his second guess was an early morning tryst. It wasn't unusual for this part of Coldharbour Marshes. Either way, it was none of his business. He intended to give the car a wide berth as he passed.

The dogs had other intentions. They sniffed the wet ground

around the tyres, growling furiously as if they had cornered some prey. The walker slowed his pace, expecting a frightened rabbit to burst free and dart across the lane to the safety of the undergrowth. The lead dog, a golden Labrador, dark with mud to its haunches, began to sniff at the driver's door, standing on its hind legs to gain a better vantage. 'What have you found there, boy?' his owner called.

Wary of disturbing a moment of passion, the walker peered cautiously through the driver's window. The glass was misted with frozen condensation. He wiped the ice crystals from the surface with his sleeve but still couldn't make out anything inside. Squinting hard, his hands cupped against his face, he could just about see a blurred shape lying across the front seats. He tapped on the glass and looked again but there was no movement or sound. Maybe it was a blanket or coat that someone had left inside? He couldn't be sure. He walked around to the front of the car, scanning the vehicle for clues. A note was tucked beneath one of the wiper blades. It was handwritten on a single sheet of waterlogged paper, the ink running in spidery patterns, the words deformed. Craning forward he could just make out the text.

*BEWARE. DO NOT OPEN. CALL POLICE.*

He stood back for a moment, the dogs circling him excitedly, and pushed his hands deeper into his pockets. Should he carry on walking? This wasn't any of his concern, after all. But what if someone was hurt? What if his intervention was a matter of life and death? It was in his nature to help in circumstances like this. A Good Samaritan streak, his friends called it.

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He took the dogs further along the lane to a safe distance and told them to sit. When they heard the grave note in his voice, they squatted side by side on the wet gravel, panting. Returning to the car, he took one last look through the fogged glass. It was still all a blur. Reaching for the handle, he pulled the door open.

That was when he saw her. It was only a glimpse. A shutter-stop image. She was lying on her side, knees huddled to her chest, still and cold. Her mouth was slightly open, her lips pursed in a tight circle, eyes wide like she was caught in the beam of a strong spotlight. Her blonde hair hung over her face in damp strands, skin as pale as milk under lines of black mascara.

Then he felt it in his nostrils. A caustic bite that made him instinctively twist away and take a faltering step backwards towards the tangled hedgerow. As he breathed in, a burning hit his throat and lungs, scouring soft tissue and flecking his lips with blood and foam. He fell to his knees, spluttering, his eyes wild.

He lay there an hour or more, rotting leaves disintegrating on the sodden ground around him, shadows falling over his prone figure as the bodywork of the car rattled in the wind. Crows settled on the high branches, staring down, beady-eyed. Over the horizon, the sound of traffic rumbled on. At the end of the lane, the dogs waited, tongues lolling, sitting obediently under a rain-heavy sky.



# 1

THE NEGOTIATION WAS nearly over. The lawyers had been working through the night, haggling over the smallest of details. The conference room was scattered with coffee cups and takeaway boxes containing the remnants of half-eaten meals. Pale sunlight caught the motes of dust hanging in the stale air. At around four that afternoon, a German merchant bank would be purchased by a British conglomerate. There would be handshakes and practised smiles and empty promises to meet later for drinks. Lewis Miller was fighting the drag of fatigue, willing the clock to wind faster. Lean and solemn with sandy hair and an air of thoughtful concentration, he tracked his pen across the text of the contract as the speaker droned from the head of the room. Around the conference table, other lawyers representing different parties, all in various states of dishevelment, steeled themselves to reach the finish line.

Lewis was focused on the page before him when his phone rattled on the mahogany tabletop. It lay face down, light

pulsing from its edges as a message came through. Disapproving eyes looked up from paperwork. The speaker gave a low grunt of irritation. Lewis grabbed the phone, cursing himself. He was sure he'd switched it off. As the junior member of the team, he was supposed to stay in the background, unheard, ready when called upon to supply a statistic or point of law. For the majority of the night he had followed the proceedings in silence. The lack of influence was hard to bear. It wasn't in his nature to remain on the sidelines.

Lewis glanced at the screen like a poker player protecting his hand. He frowned momentarily as he saw the name of the sender. The skin on the back of his neck turned cold. The message was ruthlessly brief.

*Outside. Five minutes. It's urgent.*

He leaned into the ear of the senior negotiator seated beside him.

'I have to go,' he whispered.

'Who is it?'

Lewis breathed the name. 'Charlie King.'

As head of the Commercial Division, Charlie King was someone Lewis had only heard speak from behind a lectern when giving his standard motivational address at the quarterly team meetings. He wasn't the kind of man to fire off random text messages to junior employees.

The negotiator turned to him in surprise. 'What does Charlie King want with you?' he asked.

'I have no idea,' Lewis whispered.

The negotiator's expression darkened. 'What have you done?' he growled.

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Lewis ran a mental recap of his previous week's work. He couldn't recall any mistakes that were sacking offences.

He shrugged. 'Nothing. As far as I know.'

Offering a weak smile to the room, Lewis stood and pushed his chair back into place. The meeting continued without pause, the speaker paying no attention to his exit. Lewis closed the door gently behind him as he stepped out into the corridor.

*We are what we repeatedly do*, he thought as he descended in the lift. It was a mantra he used often, one his father had taught him as a child. Lately what Lewis did repeatedly was bite his tongue and hold the muscles in his face still as he was condescended to and snapped at by privileged superiors. Ordinarily he was confident and assertive, quick to snap back when provoked, but it was a tactical necessity to conceal these attributes at work. He wasn't one of 'them', that much was made plain to him every day. He hadn't attended the right schools and wasn't part of the same network of old family connections as his colleagues. He was a cuckoo in the nest and, until he could prove himself, he was determined not to get ejected. To play along quietly and do nothing to jeopardize his precarious place on the career ladder. He was biding his time and needed to be patient. Lewis knew his professional future depended on it.

Outside, the rain was humming down. The towers of the financial district, Canada Square and West India Quay, loomed high above the streets, the vast plain of London sprawling hazily beyond Docklands. A black taxi flashed its lights as Lewis scanned the line of parked cars. Spotting a gap in the traffic, he ran across the busy road. He was tall and long-limbed with a runner's gait, light on his feet as he moved, his shoulders hunched against the weather.

The rear door of the cab opened as he approached. Lewis buttoned his jacket and straightened his tie. He had never spoken alone with one of the firm's senior partners before.

'You wanted to see me, Mr King?' he asked, peering inside.

'You're Miller?'

'Yes. Lewis Miller.'

'Get in.'

Charlie King was immaculately dressed in a charcoal worsted suit, his silver hair combed back from a deeply lined face. A formidable lawyer, he had built Renfrew and Hall into one of the City's elite firms. A select few had ascended to exalted heights in his slipstream. Lewis was planning on following them.

King nodded to the flip seat. Lewis shook the rain from his hair as he stepped inside and folded the seat down.

'I need to send you on an errand,' King said. 'It's straightforward but it's urgent.'

Lewis was hesitant. 'You want me to go now? We're still negotiating the bank merger. It's going to take a few more hours at least.'

'This is more important. I'm pulling you out immediately.'

There was no point in protesting. Anyway, being entrusted with a task by Charlie King was the opportunity Lewis had been waiting for.

'What do you want me to do?' he asked.

A stack of document files stood on the rear seat. King took a Manila envelope from the top of the pile and handed it to Lewis.

'It's a non-disclosure agreement. Completely standard. Nothing you haven't seen before. The terms are all agreed. I

need you to take it over to a firm in East London and witness the signature.'

Lewis waited for more but King seemed to have finished. 'That's all? You want me to deliver a contract?'

King softened his tone reassuringly. 'That's all.'

'Where in East London?'

'Whitechapel. You're from there, aren't you?'

There was something in King's cut-glass accent that made the question sound like an accusation.

'I'm from Stepney,' Lewis said. 'It's not far.'

'The place you're going to is a small local firm. Ask for a lawyer called Martin Sobel. He and I have already discussed the details. The address is written on the envelope. It's near Cable Street.'

Lewis began to guess why he had been chosen. A last-minute errand to Whitechapel would be a hard sell to the posh boys he worked with. Most of them hated travelling east of Chelsea.

'Who's the client?' Lewis asked.

King paused before answering. 'Robert Carlson,' he said.

It was a name spoken in the office with a respect bordering on reverence. Robert Carlson was one of the firm's most prestigious clients, a tech entrepreneur, specializing in green energy. His company, Ever Sine, was spearheading a clean power revolution. Some counted him among the select few who could save the planet. A very modern kind of saviour. Looking at the envelope in his hands, Lewis was too curious to remain silent.

'Can I ask what the purpose of the NDA is?'

Ruffling through the stack of documents beside him, King

pulled out a newspaper, a copy of that morning's *Metro*. He opened it and handed it to Lewis, pointing to an article below the fold on page six. Lewis skimmed it quickly.

'A death in Coldharbour Marshes? Why is Robert Carlson interested in this?'

'The unfortunate woman was called Maria Brennan,' King said. 'She worked as a climate scientist at his company. Carlson wants to make sure no adverse publicity washes his way. You can imagine the scrutiny the press like to keep him under. They haven't connected him to this yet but it's only a matter of time.'

Lewis looked at the photo, a blurred thumbnail in soft newsprint. She looked young and bright and striking. He read the headline out loud.

*'Bizarre Blonde Suicide in Local Beauty Spot.'*

King huffed in distaste. 'Disgraceful, isn't it? The standard of journalism in this country is lamentable.'

'The police think she killed herself?' Lewis asked.

'Yes. There was no doubt about it.'

'Why?'

'Why does anyone do something so drastic? She was only twenty-eight. It's the method she used that's garnering all the unwanted attention.'

Lewis scanned the paragraph again. 'She suffocated herself?'

'By breathing in chemicals. Apparently a few cups of domestic bleach mixed with some solvents and other household products is all it takes. Together they form a toxic mixture. It's deadly within seconds. It seems the instructions are readily available on the internet. Maria Brennan had viewed some of

these sites on the night she died. The dog walker who found her was lucky it didn't kill him too.'

'This all sounds very strange,' Lewis said.

'Which is exactly what Carlson is concerned about. He wants to avoid any blowback over this. If the press want to drag him into the story, they'll go to Maria Brennan's family and try to stir them up. Anything to sell newspapers. The NDA is to encourage the family not to speak out. The terms are very generous – a hundred thousand pounds, payable immediately. A cashier's cheque is attached to the contract.'

The amount cast the errand in a different light. It was a lot of money to keep a bereaved family away from the media, Lewis thought. This was starting to look like a classic gagging order. There had to be something more scandalous that Carlson was trying to conceal.

Charlie King saw the doubt in his eyes. 'I know it's a high price,' he said, 'but we don't need to question why. That's not our concern. It's best to consider this a sympathetic gesture from an ex-employer.'

'I understand,' Lewis said.

'I've heard good things about you, Lewis. You're keen, eager to learn and progress. Your qualification scores were impressive. How long have you been with us now?'

'Nearly three years.'

'Then it's time for you to step up a gear. Get this signed and we'll discuss finding you more responsibility in the department.'

Lewis was flattered to hear that his work had been noticed. 'Leave this with me. I'll get it done today.'

A rare smile broadened Charlie King's face. 'Thank you, Lewis. I appreciate it.'

'If you're in the office later, I'll bring the signed copies of the NDA up to you.'

King pointed to the small travel case at his feet. 'Unfortunately not. I'm in New York until Saturday. My flight leaves in a few hours. I'm trusting this to you while I'm gone, Lewis. Let me know when it's all done and dusted.'

Lewis nodded and stepped out on to the pavement. He slipped the envelope inside his jacket to protect it from the rain as the cab sped away. Treading lightly, he ran back across the street, dodging through the afternoon traffic.

He had always wanted to be lawyer, ever since he could remember. He had never thought of doing anything else, even though the profession seemed reserved for others, far removed from people like him. Being a lawyer was the ticket that would get him out of the dead end he had grown up in. He had worked hard at university, kept his head down and studied while everyone around him was partying. It had paid off. His grades were high enough for Renfrew and Hall to accept him on to their trainee scheme fresh from graduation. Since starting there, Lewis had found he was good at the job. The logic and fastidiousness suited him. But the salary had failed to live up to expectations. Competition among junior lawyers was too fierce. Like the rest of the city, he was struggling to keep his head above water. Lewis needed a chance to prove himself, to get noticed and climb the ladder. Maybe this was it.

Riding up in the lift, Lewis considered what Charlie King had told him about Maria Brennan. She had taken her own life,

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alone in a car out at Coldharbour Marshes. It seemed a tragic, senseless choice for such a young woman to make. Now he was tasked with trying to buy the silence of her family to protect the rich entrepreneur she had worked for. Something about it left a sour taste in his mouth. It was a grubby assignment, Lewis thought. But if it got him on to Charlie King's radar, it would be worth it.

## 2

ROBERT CARLSON TOLD his driver to stop on the patch of waste ground at the entrance to the nature reserve. Behind the tinted windows of the Mercedes, he peered along the lane. Finding it deserted, he opened the door and stepped out into the drizzling rain. A large bouquet of white roses and Oriental lilies was cradled in his arms.

The driver took an umbrella from the boot and began to walk alongside him. Carlson stopped. He thought it best to do this alone, away from prying eyes.

‘Wait for me in the car,’ he said.

The driver looked sceptical. The empty wetlands of Coldharbour Marshes seemed to make him nervous.

‘Are you sure, sir?’

‘Perfectly.’

Carlson took the umbrella and strode on alone, holding the flowers close to his chest. They were for a memorial, he had told the florist in Belgravia. For a young woman who had died in tragic circumstances. The florist had been adamant that

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white roses and lilies were fitting and he had accepted the advice humbly, his head bowed as if the weight of emotion made conversation difficult. Now, carrying the cellophane-wrapped flowers, he felt a growing sense of unease. It was an alien feeling but one that had become worryingly familiar in recent weeks.

At the start of his fifties, he was still youthful – a picture of corporate endeavour and high achievement. His hair was flecked with grey but his expression bore an undiminished severity that he used to his advantage when necessary. There were deep creases around his eyes but the gaze behind them was pin-sharp blue. Clutching the oversized bouquet awkwardly in one arm, he looked a long way from his natural habitat as he trudged along the track.

At the end of the lane, tangles of police tape criss-crossed the path. The muddy ground had been churned by tyres where Maria's car had driven. A small cluster of floral tributes had already been arranged nearby. A bunch of supermarket carnations propped up against a rain-soaked teddy bear. A few cards with handwritten messages inside. Carlson set his flowers down beside them. The bouquet looked gaudy and out of place. Too melodramatic for a tribute left by an ex-employer. Silently he cursed the florist for her extravagant taste.

It was strange, Carlson thought. The modern obsession with shrines and tributes. He saw them everywhere. Brief glimpses of flowers tied to lamp posts and railings as he passed by in the Mercedes. They seemed pointless and sentimental, trying to bestow poignancy on a futile event. He solved problems the way an engineer would, his training so engrained it was inescapable to him now. Quantify, assess, analyse. He

could only comprehend the world in this way. Through the purity of numbers and algorithms. He had filed his first patent at twenty-two. Reinvented the energy industry by thirty. Most problems collapsed before him, defenceless against the application of his will. It was frustrating that this situation had proved immune to his methods. So far, nothing in the chain of events had played out as predicted.

Pinned to a single red rose was a snapshot of a child, blonde and gap-toothed with long yellow braids. Carlson bent low to look closer. The resemblance to the vivacious young woman who had worked for him was unmistakable. She had the same modest smile, the same serious intensity. A rush of emotion hit him, strong enough to make his stomach turn.

Carlson could hardly believe she was really gone. He stood back, his breath quickening. The cold penetrated everything with an insidious chill. It was a sad place for anyone to meet their end. It wasn't where he would have chosen. But these thoughts would gain him nothing now, Carlson told himself. Events had taken their course.

He turned his collar to the wind and looked around. The nature reserve was empty and still, an unspoiled landscape so close to London. No buildings, no roads. All around him, the scrubby marshland was peaceful except for the calls of nesting waterfowl and the rustle of voles in the reed beds. Lapwings and redshanks whirled in the winter sky. The Thames lay close to the south, the marshes draining steadily out into its flow. The hazy outlines of passing boats were visible through the river mist. How long would it be until all this was gone? How long until everything changed? As Carlson looked around at the pristine view, he could picture the

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structures growing out of the untouched land. Loading docks. Smokestacks. Money.

Footsteps on the loose gravel snapped him back and he turned around. A couple were approaching. From their tearful expressions, the woman's puffy eyes, he guessed they were there to lay flowers at Maria's memorial. Carlson felt like an intruder on private grief. Lowering his head beneath the protection of his umbrella, he began to walk back along the lane. He passed them on the way to the waiting Mercedes and the woman gave a brief smile, a pained look of solidarity.

'Were you a friend of Maria's?' she asked tentatively.

Carlson nodded silently.

'It's so sad, isn't it?' she said. 'Maria was my cousin. We grew up together. I never thought she could do something like this.'

Tears welled up in her eyes. Her companion hugged her close.

Carlson began to move as if to walk on.

'Did you work with Maria?' the woman asked.

He paused. 'I used to.'

'At the energy company? What was it called?'

'Ever Sine,' he said flatly.

'That's it. Are you a research scientist as well?'

'Not exactly,' Carlson said.

The woman looked at him, taking him in, reading the signals in his air of affluence, his technocratic manner, his self-possessed body language. She began to scowl as a realization hit her.

'Are you Robert Carlson?' she said, her voice filling with anger.

For a moment he considered lying but he could see it was futile. She had already figured it out.

‘That’s right,’ he said.

The woman slipped from her partner’s embrace and took a step towards him, her fists clenched in anger. He thought she was going to strike him but he stood his ground and his sense of inviolability seemed to deflect her. Instead she strode to the pile of flowers on the verge and grabbed the spray of roses and lilies he had placed with the others. She swung them at him in disgust and a shower of creamy petals burst on his chest. They fluttered down to the wet ground at his feet.

‘How dare you come here,’ the woman spat, tossing the remnants of the bouquet at him.

Carlson caught the broken flowers. He wanted to speak up but could tell it was pointless. He turned and carried on walking. The couple watched him leave in disgrace. At least he could be certain of one thing now. It was obvious that Maria hadn’t been discreet about their history together.

### 3

LEWIS TOOK AN Uber from Docklands to Whitechapel. It was a while since he had been back to the depths of East London. More than a year at least. He still had friends who lived in the area but seldom saw them now. There were too many bad memories in this part of town. Whitechapel was only a few miles from the financial district but the journey transported him into a different world. The great bluffs and cliffs of steel and glass gave way to rust and decay. A pale daylight hung over the streets, washed out and colourless. Everything was ragged and worn.

Watching the passers-by outside the window, Lewis knew he'd been lucky. He'd broken out, made his escape to the safety of the professional classes. He had some security now, even if he only had one foot inside the door. He'd recently turned twenty-six so there was plenty of time still to establish himself properly, as long as he played his hand well. Patience was the key. He'd worked hard to get this far, making sacrifices, taking on debt. Lewis was sure his efforts would be

worth it in the long run. They had to be. Failing wasn't an option for someone without a safety net.

The driver stopped in a run-down street behind the bus station. The solicitor's office had a sign so faded Lewis could barely make it out. *The Whitechapel Law Centre*. Behind a steel grille, the window advertised the firm's expertise. Crime, Divorce, Immigration. They were open twenty-four hours a day. He double-checked the address again. It wasn't the kind of venue he associated with a man like Robert Carlson.

Certain it was the right place, Lewis walked into the lobby and announced himself at the desk. The receptionist looked him up and down.

'You're from Renfrew and Hall?' she said sceptically.

'Charlie King sent me.'

'You're not who we were expecting,' she said, and pursed her lips at him. 'We thought they'd send someone a bit more . . . experienced.'

Lewis let a glint of bite shine through his calm demeanour. 'How experienced do you need to be to deliver an envelope?' he asked.

Stepping out from behind the desk, the receptionist led him back through the tight warren of the building. The walls were hung with drug prevention and anti-gang posters. Coloured bins were lined up for the disposal of sharp objects. Yellow for syringes, blue for knives. In the background, a rattle of typing drifted from the doorways. Filing cabinets opening and closing. The receptionist stopped at an office at the end of the corridor. The door was already open.

'This is Lewis Miller,' she called out brusquely. 'He's here about the Brennan case.'

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She ushered Lewis inside and closed the door behind him.

There was a tension in the room, a strained atmosphere that was obvious as soon as he entered. Martin Sobel was gaunt and bearded, his eyes radiating distrust from behind his wire-framed glasses. He had the look of an activist, a community campaigner. Sobel offered Lewis a seat with a wave of his hand.

Two others were in the room. A middle-aged woman, pale and shell-shocked, and a young man in his early twenties, standing behind her, his arms folded defensively across his chest. They eyed Lewis suspiciously as he took out the envelope containing the copies of the non-disclosure agreement and set it on the desk.

‘Would you like anything to drink?’ Sobel asked.

Lewis shook his head. ‘I’d prefer to get started if that’s OK with you.’

Sobel gestured to the woman seated opposite. ‘This is Maria Brennan’s mother,’ he said. ‘I’m representing her today.’

‘I’m sorry to hear of your daughter’s death, Mrs Brennan,’ Lewis said. ‘This must be a difficult time.’

‘My name is Irina Koval,’ she replied coldly. ‘My daughter used her father’s name. It was easier that way.’

Her English was fluent but her accent was East European. She was small and delicate with an upright posture and a direct, steady gaze. Her hands were clasped in her lap, her fingers knotted tightly together.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Koval. I didn’t know.’

She glowered at him. ‘What you know is of no interest to me.’

Lewis accepted her hostility without reaction. It wasn’t his place to complain. He removed the copies of the contract from the envelope and began to hand them over.

‘I understand that you’re here to sign this non-disclosure agreement,’ he said. ‘The cheque is ready to be cashed, so—’

Irina looked outraged as she interrupted him. She was gripping her hands together, knuckles gleaming white in her lap.

‘I don’t want your money. I want answers. I want to know what happened to my daughter.’

Lewis looked at Martin Sobel, rocking gently in his office chair. ‘I thought this had all been agreed?’ he said.

Sobel shook his head. ‘I think you’ve been sent here under false pretences. The last conversation I had with Charlie King was three hours ago. I told him exactly what the family want in order to get this finished. And it isn’t money.’

Lewis sensed a trapdoor opening up beneath him. ‘Then what is it?’

Sobel leaned forward. ‘Robert Carlson,’ he said. ‘We want him to come and explain himself. I know he thinks his money makes him untouchable, but he’s wrong. If he doesn’t agree to meet with my client in person, we have no other choice.’

‘Than to do what?’

Sobel shrugged. ‘To go to the press. The fact that my client has a different surname to her daughter is the only reason they haven’t tracked her down yet. But I can assure you it’s only a matter of time. If Carlson wants to prevent his actions from becoming public, he’ll do as we ask.’

They stared at each other over the paper-strewn desk. If Sobel was playing an angle, Lewis thought, he was doing so convincingly.

‘What do you mean by “his actions”?’ he asked.

Sobel’s voice grew stern. ‘Robert Carlson deliberately ruined the career of my client’s daughter. He dismissed her from his

company without notice or warning. He waged a campaign to blacklist her. Then he began stalking her, calling her repeatedly, even confronting her at home. He drove her to an act of desperation that cost her her life. I think the least Mrs Koval deserves is an explanation from him in person.'

Lewis struggled to keep the surprise from his face. Surely this was a bluff? Sobel was grandstanding in an attempt to leverage a higher fee. 'Mr Carlson has made a generous offer,' he said.

'A derisory offer,' Sobel scoffed.

Lewis blinked. 'A hundred thousand pounds is derisory?'

'It is to a man like Carlson.'

Irina cried out to stop the meeting descending into a squabble. 'Enough!' she shouted. 'I don't care how much you think my daughter's life is worth. All I want to know is what really happened to her.'

Lewis turned to face her. 'I've seen the news reports, Mrs Koval. They all said that your daughter committed suicide.'

The young man behind Irina took a threatening step towards him. 'You need to shut your mouth with that talk,' he said. He was resolute, menacing, his nose flattened. He was wearing white trainers and a down jacket zipped up to his chin. He stared at Lewis defiantly, his fists clenched at his sides.

'I'm only repeating what was written in the newspapers,' Lewis told him.

'Say it again and I'll make you sorry,' the young man said.

'Excuse me?'

'You heard me.'

‘I don’t actually know who you are,’ Lewis said.

The young man made no attempt to reply. The temperature in the room was rising quickly.

Finally Sobel spoke up. ‘This is Drew Brennan. Mrs Koval’s son. He’s here to support his mother.’

Drew and Lewis stared at each other fiercely, each holding their ground. Lewis knew the type. He had grown up around men who were quick to intimidate and throw their weight around when it suited them. He hated to back down but had no choice.

‘I’m not here to make trouble,’ Lewis said. ‘My only job is to deliver this contract and the cheque that goes with it.’

Drew’s scowl remained frozen on his face. ‘My sister is dead. We want to know why.’

‘I understand. But I don’t have any information to help you with that.’

‘Robert Carlson does,’ Drew said. ‘Tell him to come here. I’ll make him talk.’

Lewis shook his head slowly. ‘All I can offer you is his money.’

Drew looked at his mother and waited for her response.

‘I don’t want a single penny from that man,’ Irina said. ‘All I want are answers.’

Reluctantly Lewis said, ‘Then I’m afraid I can’t help you.’

Irina reached out and took the copies of the NDA and the cheque from the desktop. ‘This is what I think of your blood money,’ she said, and ripped the pages into pieces. She let the fragments fall from her hands as she stood and began to gather her coat and bag.

‘The last two days have been hell,’ she said angrily. ‘The

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police came to my house to tell me my daughter was dead. They made me identify her body. Now you come here and try to buy me off. I won't take your money. I won't let that man get away with what he's done to Maria.'

Lewis tried to answer but he was cut off.

'Stay away from us,' Drew said. 'I don't want to see your face again.'

He opened the door and led his mother out of the room. Lewis watched them go, his career prospects disappearing with them. The weight of failure on his shoulders was overwhelming. He'd been given a simple task, a chance to prove himself, and now he had blown it.

When they were alone, Lewis bent down and picked up the torn pieces of the contract and the ripped cheque from the floor. It took a moment for his heart rate to settle. Martin Sobel swung gently in his chair. Framed photos of his wife and children stood on the windowsill. He watched Lewis with a benevolent smile.

'Charlie King sent you here on a fool's errand,' he said. 'Don't blame yourself.'

Lewis nodded in agreement. It was becoming clear that King had gambled on the sight of the cheque persuading the family to abandon their principles. He'd used Lewis as cannon fodder in an attempt to close an impossible deal. Lewis kicked himself. He wanted to get out of there quickly to save what face he had left.

Sensing his embarrassment, Sobel said, 'Look, for what it's worth, you did a good job.'

'Thanks,' Lewis said. 'But I'm in a lot of trouble now.'

Sobel looked at him sagely. 'You're thinking of ways to salvage the situation?'

Lewis held up the torn pages in his hands. 'If I don't get a signature on this contract, I'm finished.'

'There's only one way,' Sobel said. 'Arrange a meeting with Robert Carlson. The family aren't going to settle for less.'

'That's impossible.'

'Then Carlson had better get ready to see his name in the papers.'

'If anything libellous is printed about him, you know Carlson will sue.'

Sobel shrugged. 'It's only libellous if it's not true.'

Lewis thought for a moment. 'Do you really think he's involved in this?'

'Carlson was following Maria like a shadow. Calling her. Harassing her. Now she's dead and he's trying to distance himself from the fallout. That's what the rich always do – try to buy their way out of trouble.'

'Do you have any evidence for this? Or are you taking the family's word for it?'

Sobel looked cautious, weighing up whether to answer.

'Maria Brennan came to me,' he said. 'About two weeks ago. She told me everything. The phone calls. The visits to her house. She wanted my help to begin legal action.'

'So Carlson had some kind of vendetta against her?'

'It certainly seemed that way.'

'But he's a powerful man. Why would he risk everything over an employee dispute?'

'That's what he needs to account for. Otherwise there's a big question mark hanging over him.'

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‘You can’t really be suggesting he had a hand in Maria’s death?’

‘How else would you explain it?’

Lewis looked at him hopefully. ‘Coincidence?’

‘One piece of advice I can give you,’ Sobel said. ‘If you want a long legal career, stop believing in coincidence.’

## 4

IRINA KOVAL STEPPED out into the darkening street. Litter was skittering along the pavement in the frozen wind, twisting in circles around her ankles, whipping her fine blonde hair into her eyes. She gathered her coat and scarf tightly around her and began to walk down towards the high street where she could catch a bus to take her home. She looked so weary and drained that even carrying the weight of her clothes seemed an ordeal. Her son followed two paces behind, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. The solidarity they had shown in the lawyer's office seemed to evaporate in the piercing cold.

'Happy now?' Drew called out to her as she walked away.

Irina turned to face him. Her mouth was drawn tight, her lips thin and straight. 'Happy? *Zvychayno, ni.*'

Drew knew his mother was angry if she was answering in Ukrainian. 'What do you mean, "of course not"?' he said. 'You just ripped up a cheque for a hundred grand. At least tell me you got a kick out of it.'

'That cheque was a bribe to keep us quiet,' Irina said. 'If we

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take it, it's over. Carlson will never tell us what was really going on with him and Maria. We'll never find out the truth.'

'How do you know anything was going on?'

'Because I overheard the phone calls. The arguments.'

'There could be a thousand explanations.'

'Then let Robert Carlson come and tell us what they are.'

Drew lifted his arms to the sky as if in despair. 'Maria is dead. She did it to herself. The only person who thinks differently is you.'

'I'm her mother. I know she wouldn't hurt herself like that.'

'I hope you're right. You've just torn up a cheque that could have changed our lives.'

'We can't accept blood money.'

'It's easy money.'

Irina shook her head at her son's priorities. 'Easy money? Is that all you ever think about? You should try working for a change.'

Drew puffed his chest out at the accusation. 'I work hard every night.'

'I know what you do,' Irina said contemptuously. 'And I know the kind of people you work with. Maria would never stoop so low.'

The look of disgust on his mother's face was painful for Drew to see. He knew how proud she was of Maria, the favoured child. The daughter whose brilliant progress over the years she had recounted to neighbours and shopkeepers and every random stranger who cared to listen. The epitome of the immigrant success story. A part of him had always hated Maria for making it impossible for him to measure up to her. Now she was gone, he knew he was going to have to compete with her ghost.

‘I’m all you’ve got left now,’ Drew said. ‘You better start getting used to it.’

Irina’s eyes began to well with tears. ‘You don’t know how much that saddens me,’ she said.

She turned her back and strode away. Drew didn’t bother trying to stop her. There was no point. He knew how much of a disappointment he was. It was made plain to him daily. All around him, people went about their business, walking with their heads lowered. No curious eyes were cast in his direction. The locals knew better than to pry into the lives of others, especially with the aura that Drew Brennan projected. Hostility seemed to emanate from him in waves.

He held his chin high as he stalked away into the pitiless wind, dark thoughts passing like daggers behind his eyes.