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New Year's Eve

Lindsay was laughing – really, genuinely laughing – for the first time in months. And possibly even for the first time in years.

This wasn't the kind of thing she did. The car. The man. The intoxicated flight through crowded streets.

She hadn't been out on New Year's Eve for decades. Not since Peter. And, even then, it had only happened in the early years. The year that they'd met, at a party neither of them had quite wanted to go to. And for three or four years afterwards as they'd each forced themselves to go out of love for the other, with a babysitter booked to look after the child they hadn't planned on but both of them adored.

They'd each eventually admitted that the kitchen table and a game of Risk with each other held more appeal than the fireworks and the crowds. And from then on they'd stayed in, with Dylan always begging to stay up until midnight with them. He made them party a little, at least. He'd persuade them to get the Twister mat out or dance around to Pink Floyd.

And then, after Peter's slow dwindling and loss and Dylan's departure for university in Dublin, it had mostly been Lindsay alone. Her not even forty, and left to ring in the New Year with a jigsaw, and the TV, and a lot more wine than she was used to. Every year had been the same: a flood of memories from that first night, when she had fizzed with the hope that Peter might kiss her at midnight, and a sense of profound loss that she was moving into a new year without him.

It might have been easier if Dylan had chosen to stay

within easy visiting distance. But he'd met the woman of his dreams and decided to start a new life in Dublin. And so each New Year's Eve before this one had been marked, for Lindsay, by aching loneliness.

She wasn't sure what had changed tonight. Any other year, she would have been out for the count by now, numbed into oblivion by wine. She wouldn't have been in an unfamiliar car, going to watch fireworks with a man she barely knew.

She glanced over at him, this other man, who had been as tentative at first as she'd been. A man so clearly as full of hope, but also of anxiety, as she was.

She watched the intelligent, attractive lines of his face as he manoeuvred the big vehicle past a crowd of revellers that had spilled onto the road. And she felt a sense of the serendipity in everything.

She had gone for a long, hard walk until dusk. It had left her tired but also, somehow, enlivened. She'd showered and gone in her dressing gown to pour herself a glass of wine, and realised that she had somehow run herself dry. And it had seemed the right thing to do, tonight, to put on her nicest black sweater and jeans with the heeled boots she hardly ever wore, and walk to the wine shop on South Parade.

Those decisions had sent her straight into his path. And him into hers. There had been no question in her mind that this was what was meant to happen: for her to meet someone on another New Year's Eve, somewhere else she'd never really intended to go, and for the two of them to be the obvious outsiders. Clear soulmates.

Lindsay didn't know exactly where they were driving to, and it didn't worry her. He'd told her he knew where to get the best view of the fireworks, his voice full of energy and a delight at sharing this, and she believed him.

She felt a wave of joy at the trust she felt towards him. At the fact that she'd at last, *at last*, felt that same warmth and willingness she'd felt towards Peter. A hot, gut-deep excitement. A feeling of wanting to give someone else control.

'Here,' he said, as he pulled up at a temporary traffic light. He was holding a small thermos flask out to her, and she took it with a smile. Tipped it back without needing to think.

'Spiced rum and apple,' he said. 'Is that OK?'

'Definitely,' she said. It was strong but comforting. She could feel the heat of it spreading down and into her stomach, adding a sense of comfort to the jubilant feeling that had built in her all evening.

She glanced out of the car at a ruckus going on. There was a group of twenty-somethings on the pavement, drinking out of cans and yelling at each other instead of talking. On any other night, she would have felt irritated by them. Threatened maybe. Whereas tonight, she was part of an exuberant whole. She raised the flask to them, and drank again, more deeply.

He grinned, and said, 'I might have some soon. If you're OK to stay out a while so I don't have to drive for a bit.'

'I am,' she said, without hesitation. And this, again, wasn't the Lindsay who had spent the last seven years making excuses to be alone. This was the Lindsay of her past life. Perhaps an even bolder version.

He lifted his hand from the gearstick and squeezed her fingers just as the lights changed. They moved off, away from the hubbub. The bypass was quiet as they joined it and began to fly past illuminated houses. Just their car and one further ahead.

It wasn't far off midnight, and everyone who wasn't spilling out of pubs was at parties or on sofas; on riverbanks or clustered in gardens.

She realised she should send something to Dylan, before

the mobile networks jammed up. Her son would scoff at any suggestion he was sentimental, but he would mention it if he didn't get a message from her tonight.

She pulled her phone out of her jeans pocket, and found it surprisingly hard to focus on the screen. It made her laugh.

'God, can hardly read,' she said.

'Are you calling someone?'

He asked it lightly. Without jealousy.

'Just messaging Dylan.'

She glanced over to see him smiling and was glad when he said, 'I'd like to meet him sometime.'

'He'd love you,' she said. 'You're just his kind of person.'

And then her focus was on the screen for a few minutes as she laboriously typed:

Happy New Year! Hope you're all having a great time.

She scrolled for a while until she'd found a few celebratory emojis. They weren't in her most frequently used list, something she found herself thinking firmly, happily, that she was going to change. She was going to be the sort of person who was excited, happy and celebratory again. She'd never believed in New Year's resolutions, but she was making one now.

And then, in a determined move, she turned the phone off. The rest of the night was going to be about her, and him, and nothing else. She could catch up with Dylan in the morning.

By the time she looked up again, they'd left the town and were driving between trees, the road dark on either side. She squinted out through the windscreen, disorientated, until she recognised a junction. They were already at Ashurst. Had it really taken her that long to write the message?

They turned a slight bend in the road, and Lindsay's phone slid off her lap, and down into the gap between the seat and the central console.

‘Bugger.’

‘What’s up?’

‘My phone is . . .’ She waved, her hands feeling only vaguely connected to her. God, she was drunk.

She reached over to get it, just as he lifted his arm to look underneath it, and her head collided with his elbow, hard.

‘Eesh,’ he said.

Lindsay found herself laughing. ‘Sorry.’

‘You shouldn’t be apologising.’ He shook his arm, glancing at her. ‘That must have hurt. You OK?’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, grinning at him. ‘I can’t even feel it.’

‘Good,’ he said, shaking his head slightly as he looked back at the road. ‘You’re clearly tougher than I am.’

She reached down for the phone again, her fingers finding it, but not able to grasp it. She succeeded only in shoving it backwards, until it was pushed into the rear of the car.

‘Sorry. Hang on.’

She pulled on the seat belt to give herself more room, and half turned in her seat. Twisting her right arm, she could just about reach down to where the phone now sat.

In this contorted position, she could see into the rear of the car, and at first it meant nothing to her: the neatly bound piles of wood wedged front to back, one of which stretched out towards her. The can of kerosene. They were just things. The sorts of things people had in their cars sometimes.

But then she found herself thinking about a woman, and a murder, and a bonfire. A lonely forty-something woman whose photo had appeared again and again in the papers and online. A woman who had reminded Lindsay of herself in painful ways. A woman whose killer hadn’t yet been found, though everybody had tried.

And the happy, detached contentment suddenly shifted. She felt it for what it was: a fog of confusion that was

descending, and overtaking her, as he drove her god knew where. And with it came the most crushing sense of dread.

He's drugged you, she thought, furious with herself. Though the fury was hard to hold onto in the haze that was wrapping itself around her. *You shouldn't have had the drink*.

And then she thought about the three drinks she'd already accepted from him. And she realised that he might have been drugging her for hours.

She briefly imagined the other woman, Jacqueline, drinking with him too. Getting into the car with him and taking the flask. And then being unable to defend herself as he dragged her out into the middle of the woods.

And still there was a part of her that wanted to let him kiss her. That hoped she was wrong.

No. You have to get out. You have to get out now.

The thought was almost enough to keep her focused. She needed to do something to make him pull over.

But she might not be able to make him stop. She needed the phone. It was her one chance to call for help. And if he knew she'd done that, then maybe she'd be safe.

She reached further, ignoring the kerosene and the wood – a piece of which pressed into her head as she turned – and stretching out with her fingers. She could feel how close he was to her now. How vulnerable she was. It was no longer exciting.

But somehow it was hard to hold on to her fear. Even to concentrate. She found herself staring into nothing, even while her body was twisted uncomfortably, her arm out towards the phone.

'You OK?' he asked, his voice rumbling close to her. It jolted her, kicking a little fear back into the haze.

'Just trying to reach it,' she said. And she tried to laugh. And then she found herself laughing for real, for some

reason. It was so stupid, not being able to get her hands on the bloody phone. What a ridiculous way to end up dead.

The tips of her fingers slid on it, barely able to grip. She'd only shoved it further away.

'It's OK; we're nearly there,' he said.

She became aware that the car was jolting now. That it was tipping and rolling over something bumpy. The phone slid beyond the touch of her fingers.

She put a hand out to the wood to steady herself, but the nearest piece wasn't very well tied. It started to come out of the bundle.

She found her hand gripping it as she faced forwards again, and tried to remember to be afraid as she saw that they were driving down a high, open track over heathland.

'We'll get a great view up here,' he said.

She saw that he was smiling. It was a surprisingly warm smile.

You need to get away, she thought. *Get away from him, Lindsay.*

She sure as hell couldn't fight, with her limbs feeling loose and her thoughts foggy. And she wouldn't have stood much chance anyway. As fit as she was, he was clearly stronger, his muscles used to activity.

There was a stand of gorse ahead of them, suddenly, and he swung the car round to park next to it. They were on the brow of a hill, looking out over woodland below. And it was familiar to her. Lindsay had walked here.

'Lyndhurst Heath,' she said, out loud, unclipping her seat belt clumsily and letting it slide across her.

'I love it up here,' he said, turning to her.

He looked as though he might kiss her. And for a moment a surge of longing made her hesitate.

What if he meant everything he said? What if he really feels this?

But even through the haze, she saw a flicker of something

cross his face. Something anticipatory. Faltering. Something that wasn't adoration.

And suddenly Lindsay wanted nothing less than his kiss. She pointed past him, and said, 'Look!'

As he turned, she pulled the piece of wood free and jabbed it at him as hard as the confined space and her loose-feeling arms allowed. She felt it jar as it connected with the back of his head and heard him cry out.

She didn't wait for him to react further. She dropped the wood and opened the door. She slid out, and then she ran for the trees, down a path she knew well.

She heard the car door opening a way behind her. And then there was another shout. It was angry this time. She hadn't injured him; she'd only pissed him off.

She just had to make it to the trees. That was all. Get there, and hide.

She looked up at them, their shadowy shapes seeming close but also impossibly distant, and she could feel the fuzziness closing in further. Her legs were almost entirely without feeling as she ran, every bump in the ground sending her bouncing over it.

'Lindsay!'

He was behind her, and he was closer. So much closer.

Lindsay tried to focus on the blurring trees, fighting the exhaustion, and the part of her that told her to give up.

No, no, no, the stronger, more stubborn part of her repeated. And as she tripped, and stumbled to her knees, it was that part of her that let out a howl of fury at the unfairness of it all.

PART ONE

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I

1 January

He'd watched them ever since that first fire back in October. Followed their little team from scene to scene as they tried to unpick it all.

He'd been with them, in an ironic sort of camaraderie, while they'd walked it over, and attempted to work out who had been burned to ashes in the forest. Though none of them had seen him. He was good at being invisible when he wanted to be.

He'd been with them, invisibly, for most of the three months since. Always watching them. Always unseen. He'd followed them to the victim's house, and on visits to bars and shops and cafés. He'd followed them as they'd gone to interview possible suspects, and smiled to himself as he'd seen them leave with expressions of frustration.

He hadn't just watched them, of course. He'd read about all of it, in print and online. He'd known the moment they'd identified the victim as forty-six-year-old Jacqueline Clarke. He'd read all about her lonely life in Brockenhurst, as viewed through the eyes of a journalist.

He'd cut round each photograph of striking, sandy-haired Jacqueline and kept it. And each photograph of the team too.

One of the local press had used the term 'the Bonfire Killer' in a follow-up piece, and even though it hadn't been picked up on elsewhere, he'd liked it and started using it privately.

Two weeks after Jacqueline Clarke had been found, he'd

watched them rush to a second pyre, this one still burning. He'd seen them douse it, even though it was abundantly clear that there was no body on it this time. And then he'd smiled to himself at their confusion. Their consternation.

He knew what they were thinking. He was too far away to hear most of their conversation, but he could read their expressions in the harsh lights that arrived with them.

They think it might happen again, he told himself. They're expecting another Jacqueline Clarke now. Another Bonfire Killer victim.

The little team had begun to travel further afield, as they tried to tie in other crimes, and he'd followed them. Many of them had been laughably dissimilar, but as some of them had picked over the burnt remnants of a house in West Gradley, where a woman of Jacqueline Clarke's age had died, he'd enjoyed their angst. Their uncertainty about whether to investigate it further.

Their agitation had been clearer still at the next two sites. Two more fires, each without a victim. And at each one their movements had been faster, like ants disturbed by a stick. He'd found it all amusing.

The thing he hadn't expected to feel, however, was an increase in his own sense of camaraderie towards them. Somehow, in watching them all work, he'd developed an odd sort of affection for them. For DCI Jonah Sheens and his wry thoughtfulness. For DS Domnall O'Malley and his warmth.

Maybe even for DS Ben Lightman, whose model-handsome good looks had produced an immediate revulsion in him. As though he was some Hollywood actor pretending to be a police officer. He'd hated him on sight.

But it had been hard to keep up the same level of distaste when he'd seen Ben Lightman pull on wellingtons and wade through mud, and then stand in drizzle for an hour and a half at an extinguished pyre. That hour and a half of

standing in the rain was an experience the two of them had shared, despite Ben Lightman not knowing it.

And then, of course, there was Juliette. He thought of her as Juliette, not by her title. She was different. So easy to watch. To be drawn to. He found himself watching her even when the action was elsewhere. When more interesting things were going on.

Things shifted for him after the third pyre, too. He'd left before the team, heading back to the four-by-four he'd hired for the occasion using a fake driving licence. He'd parked it back up the track, to be out of sight, and as he walked back to it he'd passed Juliette's little Nissan Micra which she'd parked off to the side of the poor-quality road.

The Micra was clearly, profoundly and irretrievably stuck in the mud. Something Juliette was going to discover when she tried to drive it away.

He looked at his watch. It was almost midnight. She'd be making that discovery at close on one a.m., at a guess.

He went to the car and tried the door. It was, he realised with a shiver of excitement, unlocked.

And a strange, thrilling thought had run through him. He could actually help her. He could help Juliette. Do something kind for her. And if he did it right, she might suspect that it had been him, but never know for sure.

He'd glanced back towards the lights of the crime scene, way back down the track beyond a locked gate. They were half a mile away, and most of the forensics team would be there for hours.

Without any further hesitation, he'd gone to get the rental four-by-four with its steel-cable pulley, attached it to the Micra's tow bar, and pulled it clear of the mud. He'd done it with his lights off, and the revs low, and his gaze half on where the police might return from at any time. But by the

time he'd dragged the car back onto the stony road, nobody had come.

With a smile to himself, he'd unhitched the cable and driven away, feeling a bond connecting the two of them that he'd not expected. A strangely satisfying one.

Now, today, as he dressed carefully, he thought of the help he'd given her. It warmed him as he pulled his shirt on in the chilly bedroom.

He wondered, idly, what she'd think of his outfit. Though what he really wanted to know was what she would think of the little surprise he had in store for her today.

The best thing about not going out on New Year's Eve, Aisling had decided, was how much nicer it made the bank holiday. Gone were the days where she would wake up at ten, her head full of pain and a vague sense of shame and regret hovering. Admittedly, she still had a slight headache from the bottle of Chablis she'd drunk most of on the sofa. But she was confident that would be gone after a few hours and a couple of ibuprofen.

It was so much better to really enjoy a morning spent with her boys, even if Ethan was clearly struggling with a monster hangover. Her older son had managed to make it out of his war zone of a bedroom at ten, his face pale, and his mop of blond curls standing up like it had been backcombed.

He'd given monosyllabic answers to Aisling's cheerful greetings. This was out of character enough for her to say, 'Aww, good night, was it?'

Finn, by contrast, had been up since before Aisling, and was now almost offensively full of energy. He bounced around the kitchen, fetching ingredients for their customary eggs benedict and keeping up a stream of chatter about all the big events from the night before. Aisling hadn't really been following, but the main gossip seemed to be his friend's girlfriend deciding to switch her attentions to the friend's older brother.

'I mean, in all honesty, he might be a really decent guy,' Finn told her, at the point when she had zoned back in, 'but I just can't see how that's ever worth it for either of them. I

mean, Pete's completely bruk, and can't even look at his brother, and Lauren's now basically lost her whole fam.' He heaved a big sigh. 'I know people think it's love, and you can't help it when it's love, but you have a choice, right? I mean, there were points where both of them could have gone, "You know what? I'm not going to flirt with, like, my brother's girlfriend," or whatever. I just – I can't see Marian doing that. Or Ethan being happy to go along with it either.'

'Definitely would,' Ethan called from the table.

Finn just grinned at him. 'You'd have to start doing some exercise to be in with a chance. Marian's not massively into the whole layabout rock-star thing.'

'That's just what she tells you,' Ethan retorted.

Aisling turned to shake her head at him, and realised that he was slumped almost entirely onto the tabletop. He looked rough, and like he was in the throes of proper hangover depression too. His attempts at their usual banter were not matched by his expression at all.

God, how much did he drink? Aisling wondered. Was he sick?

At nineteen Ethan was technically old enough to look after himself, but he had a thoughtless streak that made him in many ways more of a worry than his seventeen-year-old brother. This was attested to by the number of times he'd set fire to things in his room, or thrown away objects he'd then needed, or ended up stranded after not considering how he would get home from an impulsive trip. It didn't help that he was by nature a people-pleaser, and would sometimes agree to do ridiculous things just to avoid killing the vibe.

Finn was a very different person. Despite being two years younger, he was a great deal more definite about what he wanted, and always had his eye on the long game. He was hard-working, responsible, and dead set on a career in professional tennis. Which meant he was never going to get

himself so drunk that he was sick, or call her at three a.m. from a car park in Lymington.

‘What time did you crawl in?’ she asked Ethan, wanting to go and ruffle his hair but unable to leave the eggs at the critical stage of poaching.

Ethan gave a shrug. ‘Don’t know. Two? Something like that?’

‘Did you leave your car at Matthew’s?’

‘Er, yeah.’ Aisling stayed looking at him long enough to see that he glanced towards his brother. ‘I’ll pick it up after rehearsal.’

‘I’d suggest *much* later,’ Aisling said. ‘Like, maybe tomorrow.’

‘I’ll be OK once I’ve eaten something,’ Ethan said a little tetchily.

Aisling decided to ignore this rare bad humour. She finished cooking, and served up two plates of eggs. She let Finn add bacon and dribble his home-made Hollandaise sauce over the top.

‘You two start,’ she said. ‘Mine’ll only be a minute.’

She watched Finn pick the plates up to carry them to the table, and saw that he’d got what looked to be a fresh bandage on his left leg.

‘Did you cut yourself last night?’ she asked, waving the egg spoon at him.

‘Oh, no,’ Finn said, with a slightly brittle laugh. ‘Just from running the other day. I trod on a stick, which jumped up and bit me.’

‘Poor stick,’ she said with a grin.

‘Marian says “Happy New Year”, by the way,’ Finn said, dumping the plates and picking up his phone.

‘Tell her the same back,’ Aisling told him. ‘When’s she coming to stay again?’

‘Probably not until February realistically,’ Finn said with a short sigh. ‘Too many weekend commitments for both of us.’

Aisling felt a squeeze of sadness for him. She had never pushed him to excel at tennis. The drive came purely from within, but it didn’t always make his life easy. And falling for another very driven tennis player who lived halfway across the country didn’t help much, either.

She served herself and joined the two of them at the table. Finn had already managed to eat half his four-egg plate. Ethan, by contrast, was looking at his barely touched food with a slightly queasy expression.

She was about to ask him if he needed painkillers when he pushed the plate away and said, ‘Mummo, have you seen that Amazon package that came for me?’

‘No.’ She started eating. ‘Hasn’t crossed my radar. What’s in it?’

‘Plectrums.’

Aisling raised an eyebrow at him. ‘I gave you some for Christmas. Can’t you use them?’

‘I can’t find them either,’ Ethan said, with a slightly sheepish look. ‘I’m going to need some for rehearsal later. I owe Dan a couple too.’

‘Of course you do,’ Aisling said. ‘How big is this package?’

‘It’s like . . . A5?’ He gestured with his hands.

‘And it definitely arrived?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, it was in the hall.’

‘Where presumably you decided it would now live until you needed it.’ She shook her head with a half-smile. ‘Did you ask your brother? Finn, have you seen this Amazon package of your useless sibling’s?’

Finn was doing a good job of ignoring them both as he

ate, but he paused long enough to say, ‘Oh. Yes. I put it in your room.’

‘Ah, Jesus,’ Ethan said, with only a trace of humour. ‘I’ll never find it now.’

‘True, that,’ Finn shot back. ‘You could lose actual small countries in there.’

Barks, their miniature schnauzer, rose from his basket at that point and climbed delicately onto Ethan’s lap. Ethan, who usually made a huge fuss over the dog, didn’t seem to notice.

Aisling looked at her older son more carefully, wondering whether he was just hungover, or whether he was actually unhappy. He’d been to his so-called friend Matt’s house for a party, but Aisling knew full well that that friendship was extremely unreliable. Matt could be a full-on arsehole at times, though he was mostly just irritating. Ethan sometimes had to rely on him to step in and play when they were a band member short, but she still didn’t see why he spent time with the guy beyond that.

Though, in fact, most of Ethan’s friends were a little grating. Aisling couldn’t help preferring Finn’s sweet if hopelessly posh friends to Ethan’s self-absorbed musical ones.

‘Ooh,’ Finn said suddenly, leaning forwards onto the table with his phone in his hand. ‘There are loads of police on the heath. Look.’

He held his phone out towards Aisling, who peered at a photograph that had been shared on Twitter. It showed an elevated shot of the far end of Lyndhurst Heath, towards the woods. Right by the treeline was a cluster of police cars and vans, and there were two figures in white who looked like forensics officers.

‘Is that from today?’

Finn nodded. ‘Yeah. I might run over that way. Go and see what’s going on.’

‘Don’t be a ghoul,’ Aisling said. But then she found herself pulling out her phone and googling for articles about events on Lyndhurst Heath. Nothing came up.

It was unsettling to think about something happening so close by. Forensic teams implied something serious.

She’d always thought of the New Forest as safe, at least from serious crime. But that had changed three months ago, when a lonely forty-something woman had been murdered not far away. An ordinary, average person named Jacqueline who could so easily have been Aisling herself. She felt a little skip to her heartbeat at the thought that this might be another woman dead. Another murder. Was there really nothing online about it yet?

She tried searching a few different terms, but only came up with articles about the original murder. Which might mean it was unimportant, or simply that nothing had made it into the press yet.

Ethan rose to make himself coffee, and Aisling turned her phone over. She shouldn’t be thinking about murders. She should be focusing on her sons. On today.

She found herself watching the two of them, for a moment, with a strange sense of nostalgia. Almost as if this scene was already done and she was looking back on it with longing.

She often felt a hint of sadness at the dawn of a new year. It had to do with saying goodbye to all the festivities and time with her boys. But the New Year was always spiced up, too, with a back-to-school feeling. A forward-looking determination to shake off the booze and the indulgence and get to work.

But right now that energised feeling was absent. She felt, instead, a sense of loss. Perhaps, she thought, it was because they might only have one more Christmas together in this house. If they were lucky.

She almost wished she could trust her sons with the truth of their financial situation. It would have been such a relief to share the burden of it, but that wasn't something she was willing to do to either of them. Ethan had none of the skills necessary to help, and Finn had the right to a proper childhood and adolescence, free of the worries of adulthood.

Which meant it was Aisling alone who knew the reality facing them. Her sons assumed that with one mega-hit game under her belt and a steady stream of work coming in, Aisling was very comfortable. She'd never admitted to them how little she'd actually made from *Survive the Light*, or how many things she'd gone without to keep them at their public school. They didn't know how much juggling she'd had to do to keep up Ethan's touring with his band, or Finn's tennis lessons and tournaments.

She'd sometimes asked herself if she was mad trying to send them to a public school when she had nowhere near that kind of money. The whole idea of Hanyard House had come from Stephen, her charming but ultimately selfish ex-husband, who had chosen to walk out on them when the boys were two and four rather than face up to his responsibilities as a father. She suspected now that he had sent them there in the hope that they might start boarding, freeing him from most of his parental obligations.

Pride had made Aisling settle for far less in the divorce than she should have done. It was clear to her now that she should have demanded support for their school fees right up until they turned eighteen. But, of course, she hadn't been sure she *wanted* them to stay at that school. So she'd decided, for continuity, that she'd just stick with it while they were in junior school. Make her sons' disrupted lives as easy as possible by letting them stay at the place they were used to for the time being.

But they'd each, in turn, been put forward for scholarships to the senior school and won them. Ethan had been awarded a huge music scholarship, and a small academic one, and Finn had followed that up with almost half his fees paid by a sports scholarship with more offered for his academic ability.

It had made Aisling feel duty-bound to send them there. She felt as though they'd earned it, and she'd vowed to somehow manage the five thousand a year she still had to find for each of them.

She'd done it too, but only by using up her full inheritance from her mum, and then by gradually sinking further and further into overdrafts and loan debts. There had been heart-stopping moments, like when she'd been refused an increase on a loan to bridge a gap and had looked around frantically for a solution with a feeling of impending doom.

She'd felt incredibly alone then. With no parents to turn to, and no partner, and with a friendship group that consisted entirely of parents who had no concept of financial issues, she'd known that it was all on her.

Her biggest fear had been of losing the house. She'd worked so hard on this little place to make it perfect. To make it *theirs*. It had been a tired, depressing building when they'd moved in, and she'd sunk hundreds of hours into stripping off old wallpaper, painting, and creating perfect lighting.

The place was beautiful now, she thought. Comfortable and airy. And it made the most of the view out onto the fields behind too. She could sit in her kitchen and gaze out at them whenever she wanted, and it had made a lot of things better over the years.

Even now, with her sons all but grown-up, the thought of having to move out broke her heart. Though she knew it would solve a lot of their financial problems. She could sell

the house at a significant profit and start again, buying another fixer-upper somewhere promising, and slowly making it hers. She'd be able to reduce their mortgage and her debts all at once. But it would still tear her up to do it.

But I might not have to, she thought, as breakfast turned into a good-natured argument over the washing-up, *if I can sell SINN*.

SINN was her new game. Her secret, cherished project. She'd worked at it for the past year. Around all the board-meetings for the start-ups she'd sat on. Around the management of her house and her sons.

She knew it was brilliant. That it was as good or better than *Survive the Light*. It was just about convincing Sony, and getting them to pay her what it was worth this time.

As Finn bullied Ethan into helping wash up, she pulled her phone out of her dressing-gown pocket and looked through her emails again, uncertain why she was checking. Sony weren't going to reply to her message now. It was New Year's Day. She just had to wait until the right people were back from leave, and then they could set a date to meet. She knew that she'd piqued their interest already.

She found herself glancing through the few emails that had landed between Christmas and New Year. She hadn't really looked at any of them. Most of them were threads about the new start-up she'd joined the board for, a very enthusiastic little developer based in Holborn called VePlec.

She found herself sighing over the ambitious tone of their emails. Aisling usually loved that aspect of start-ups. The way their enthusiasm hadn't yet had a chance to meet hard-hitting reality. She loved the way their ideals meant more than money.

But the founder of this company was full-on arrogant. He seemed to think he was Steve Jobs crossed with Elon Musk, when he was actually just a fairly ordinary nerd who'd teamed

up with the right people. He also had a habit of annoying potential investors with blithe statements about how much better this game was going to be than everything that had gone before.

She shook her head over the most recent thread. The CEO suspected someone was sharing concepts and code with a rival developer. An idea Aisling thought about as likely as Sony sitting in on their first board meeting.

There are clear signs from recent Adelpho announcements that they are imitating details of our new game platform in ways that go beyond coincidence.

Except, Aisling thought, that when he went on to list them, they were so vague as to sound indeed like coincidence. And, in fact, like another firm developing another slightly retro platform game.

‘Oh my god,’ she said out loud, with a grin, as she read on. ‘The founder of this start-up is nuts. He thinks someone’s stealing the IP of a game nobody’s ever heard of. He’s even hiring a private investigator to *go undercover* in the firm.’

‘Oh, that’s great,’ Ethan said, looking animated for the first time this morning. ‘They could hire me. I could totally get away with being a developer for a week. A lot better than some PI who knows nothing about games. And I can always tell when someone’s sneaking around.’

‘I’d hire you,’ Aisling said, and then, reading on, added, ‘Ahh, shame. They already hired someone. Your big break, ruined.’

She scrolled down through the email, intending to read out the name of the PI so they could all have a laugh about it. But instead she found herself looking at one sentence, over and over, her heart squeezing in her chest.

Jack O'Keane, from O'Keane and Ross, will be working undercover within the firm.

She found herself remembering, in a sharp rush, a fifteen-year-old boy with dimples and a tolerant smile. Him taking her hand. Him laughing at her as she spun off the track in *Mario Kart*. Thoughts of his breath mixing with hers on a cold night.

They were memories she had never really allowed in. Not for thirty years. And they left her heart speeding like she'd run for miles.

The wind over Lyndhurst Heath was cold. Unforgiving. It ripped at exposed skin, and Jonah felt an urge to cover the woman they'd found lying here. But the blueness of her skin was more than simple cold. It would never warm back up to a healthy colour.

McCullough was here, of course, though as Hampshire Constabulary's in-house forensic scientist, she wasn't meant to be. They had a chief forensic officer who was nominally in charge of the process of gathering evidence. But Linda McCullough was obsessed, hyper-conscientious, and incapable of trusting anyone not to spoil the samples that would go to her for analysis. She had also taken scene of crime training specifically in order to feel qualified to interfere.

She did at least restrict herself to the serious crime scenes. Which meant that Jonah was entirely used to meeting her at places like this. At places of murder. Of violence. Of suffering that had grown cold with time.

They had their roles mapped out precisely. Well, McCullough had them mapped out. Jonah's role as DCI and senior investigating officer was to take a cursory glance and then keep well out of the way. She and the forensic science team would secure the scene and get to work. Jonah would watch, perhaps drinking coffee, while they photographed, took samples and discussed among themselves their findings. With a murder like this, a pathologist would also be brought in. Once they were ready, Linda McCullough would run Jonah through it all, letting the chief forensic officer listen in if he or she were lucky.

Jonah stepped further away from the scene, trying to keep his hastily pulled-on trainers out of the patches of standing water that were scattered around the heath. He hadn't been prepared for this today. He'd woken at nine, thinking about a bike ride and then cooking a roast, possibly while also trying to entertain Milly. At almost six months old, she was nothing if not demanding.

He'd been looking forward to eating and then collapsing in front of a child-appropriate film with Milly and his partner, Michelle. Some genuinely nice time together, in contrast with what had felt like fleeting, practical interactions for the last three months.

But there were some calls you couldn't ignore, and this had been one of them. It had set up a dull, beating thrum in him the moment he had answered it.

Forty-six-year-old woman . . . Body left on a pyre . . .

That's what they'd said, but what he had heard, insistently, was the phrase: *Serial killer. Serial killer. Serial killer.*

They had known they might find themselves here. Ever since October, when Jacqueline Clarke's barely recognisable remains had been found on a pyre near to Longbeech Campsite. And increasingly, as they'd chased empty pyre after empty pyre across the New Forest.

They'd been desperate to stop it happening, and they had failed.

He'd seen the same knowledge in Domnall O'Malley's eyes as his sergeant had arrived on scene. The heavy tiredness. The feeling that this was their failure.

'Found by a dog walker,' Jonah told him. 'He's over by the squad car, being given tea. He looks freezing and fed up. Want to put him out of his misery?'

O'Malley had nodded, pulling out his iPad in order to take notes. Jonah could have spared the dog walker a few minutes

in the cold and talked to him before O'Malley arrived, but he'd felt instinctively that this was a place for his friendly detective sergeant. For O'Malley's warm, mates-together banter and his Kilkenny brogue. Not for a senior officer who would be the focus of his irritation and complaints.

O'Malley had headed over to the witness and Jonah had been left with a rapidly cooling takeaway cup of coffee rustled up by a constable. That, and his thoughts, many of which were bleak.

The sound of a car engine reached him a while later, and he saw Juliette Hanson's Nissan Micra arriving at the top of the hill, making heavy weather of the bumpy track. His detective constable parked close to Jonah's own Mondeo, and climbed out. She was still several hundred metres away, but it was as far as any car could go without some serious tyres and four-wheel drive.

Jonah went to meet her at the bottom of the slope. He was relieved to see that she had changed into hiking boots, though they looked a little odd with her knee-length black-and-white dress and thin wool jacket. It made him feel all the worse about dragging her away from the funeral.

She nodded to him. 'Chief.'

'Sorry about this.' He tried to read her expression. 'How did it go? Was Ben . . . ?'

'He did perfectly, of course,' Hanson said, with a wry smile. 'Amazing speech, everything organised flawlessly. The wake was lovely too. Country pub. You know.'

Jonah gave a small smile. He could well imagine. Ben, the fourth member of their team, was one of those people who seemed to achieve perfection without trying. From his movie-star good looks and athleticism, to his absolute self-control and organisation, he was a model officer. But he was also, Jonah had long suspected, someone who struggled to

be open about the feelings that bubbled away underneath, and the death of his father couldn't have been easy on him.

He wanted to find out more, but it wasn't the time. Instead he asked, 'Have you got more layers with you?'

'Umm . . . I might have something in the car,' Hanson offered. 'I can have a dig around if we're here long.'

'I would. I'm freezing even in my big coat. I'll talk you through and then you should layer up as much as you can.' He glanced up towards the hill, and realised that there was someone standing up there, close to where Hanson had parked. A twitcher, by the looks of it, in a woolly cap and wax jacket with a pair of binoculars. He might not have been exactly invading the crime scene, but with binoculars he'd be able to see a lot of the activity from up there.

'Hey,' he called to the closest pair of uniformed constables. 'Can you move him on?'

The two officers nodded, and started up the hill, but the twitcher turned and ambled away of his own accord. Hopefully, Jonah thought, before he'd had time for a ghoulish look or to take a photo. The thought of a high-quality image appearing before they'd had the chance to contact the victim's family made him feel decidedly uneasy. But there was only so much they could do in a very open public space.

He turned back towards the cluster of white suits, and Hanson followed. 'OK,' he said. 'So she was found at eleven.'

'Another pyre?' Hanson made an effort to tuck her blonde hair out of her eyes. It was being whipped around by the wind, and she was wearing it loose today. Part of her funeral look instead of her practical policing one. 'We think it's the same perp?'

'Yes,' Jonah agreed. 'And yes. But it didn't burn, this time.' He felt, all over again, the same rush of incremental yet tainted hope he'd felt when he'd first arrived at the pyre. 'For

reasons that aren't clear, it looks like he or she doused the fire just after it began to catch. There's a fire extinguisher been used. The body is untouched.'

He glanced at her. 'And there's blood. It doesn't look like it's the victim's.'

'So there's a chance of DNA?' Hanson asked.

'Maybe,' Jonah said. 'Though I haven't been close enough to the scene to know.' He gave her a wry grin. 'McCullough's been on the warpath.'

He watched Hanson's reaction, seeing that same, complex reaction he'd had. The deep-rooted anxiety over this being, almost without doubt, a serial killer at work would have hit her too. Hanson would know, as he did, that this second death made a third enormously more likely. Although there was no absolute pattern among serial killers, the step up from one killing to two was often like the breaking of a dam. The killer found confidence. They felt powerful. It made everything they did far more important, and every mistake potentially a fatal one. And that made all of them feel huge pressure.

But fighting with that pressure would be the hope that this second killing might give them the evidence they needed to solve the first. If they could just do it before anyone else became a victim.

Jonah heard Linda's voice from close by before Hanson could answer. McCullough was approaching, her mask raised now as she moved away from the crime scene.

'There's definitely blood,' she told him. 'And it isn't the victim's.'

Hanson turned to look at her with her mouth slightly open. 'We might have the killer's DNA?'

'Yes,' Jonah agreed. 'We might.'

Jack O'Keane.

The name kept repeating in her head, as Aisling went to shower and get dressed, and then to steal laundry from Ethan. She'd heard the name's rhythm as she'd made a mug of tea and settled herself in the kitchen with her phone to do some New Year's scrolling.

She'd been half listening to Ethan and Finn as they made food. Ethan was creating some bizarre sandwich to take to rehearsal while Finn was making vegetable-rich pasta to eat after his run. She found herself wanting, badly, to break into their conversation and tell them about Jack. But this was one thing she couldn't mention to either of them.

They'd always been so open about everything. So honest with each other. At least, they'd *become* honest, after Stephen had walked out to pursue his affair.

With him gone, she'd felt suddenly that it was the three of them against the world. That they had to be a team now. She'd tried so hard to have a relationship with them that was imbued with honesty. She'd been truthful about why Stephen had gone, and clear that it was absolutely his own fault and not theirs. And if she'd stopped short of telling them that their father had gone for a twenty-two-year-old intern in the biggest cliché in the book, she'd told them everything else.

She'd learned to admit, when they'd seen her crying over a memory of their previous life, that she *was* sad. But that being sad was OK sometimes. She'd told them, truthfully, about her need for space from them sometimes. And when

they'd begun asking questions about sex, she'd been honest about that too.

She supposed it was only natural that they'd decided to become an active part of her dating life. Not that she'd planned it that way exactly. Ethan had seen a Tinder notification on her phone a couple of years before, and had demanded to see her profile. It had made her cringe. But when you'd engendered an idea of total openness, you had to practise it.

'Why haven't you mentioned gaming?' he had asked indignantly, having grabbed her phone off her. 'I can't believe you've said you like long walks, but haven't mentioned how much you like playing *Halo*. Or that you actually design games for a living, like.'

'Look, I'd quite like to meet a grown-up,' she'd said. 'And I feel like most of those are going to be put off if I say I like shooting the shit out of stuff on screen.'

Ethan had shaken his head. 'You want to attract people who are actually *fun to hang around with*. If you put that long-walks-and-nice-wine stuff up, you're going to get a bunch of twitchers and socially inept bankers.'

That had made her laugh, of course. And she hadn't protested very seriously when the two of them had composed a new profile.

Her sons' version had, in fairness, sounded a lot more like Aisling than her own efforts. It was warm, silly, and game-orientated. It was also firmly against hook-ups.

'What if I *do* want hook-ups?' she'd asked them indignantly.

'Oh my god, Mum,' Finn had said, appalled. 'You are not allowed to say that to us.'

'You're the ones interfering in my love life!'

'It's for your own good,' Finn had told her. 'And ours too. We don't want sleazeballs walking in here.'

‘Or some boring bastard coming round, talking about tomato growing and pensions,’ Ethan had added. ‘Actually, we’d better help you pick who to swipe on.’ To her noisy protests, he had started viewing potential matches. ‘I’ll let you choose which way to swipe,’ he’d allowed magnanimously. ‘But you clearly need our feedback on them first.’

Unlikely though it sounded, scrolling through Tinder profiles with her teenage sons had turned out to be hilarious. Mostly because a lot of men had no idea how to choose photographs.

‘There’s another one with a finger up his nose!’ Finn had yelled through the hysterics at one point. ‘What is *wrong* with them? Do they think women actually go for that?’

‘Maybe we’re the ones who are wrong,’ Ethan commented. ‘Maybe nose picking is a massive turn-on to some women.’

‘Oh my god,’ Aisling had said of the next one. ‘Is that a photograph from his *own wedding*?’

That particular photograph had made her laugh so hard she couldn’t breathe.

‘Who does that?’ Ethan asked, once he’d stopped laughing enough to talk.

‘Well, I mean, he had dressed up for the occasion,’ Finn said. ‘Shame to waste a good suit.’

From then on, the worst examples of Tinder pics had become a regular source of entertainment for the three of them. Aisling had started taking screenshots to send her sons, and even passed on some of the cringeworthy messages she’d received. She would occasionally tell the boys about the nice guys she met too, but that was distinctly less fun.

She’d kept the edited profile they’d written, as well, and had ended up getting their help choosing images. The result had been a lot more matches than she’d had before, even if she hadn’t clicked with anyone yet. She may not have picked

up a boyfriend, but she had met three new online gaming buddies, and Ethan and Finn sometimes squadded up to play with them too.

Openness and honesty, she thought, as she watched Ethan dump his laundry into the machine. *Honesty and openness in everything. Except one thing . . .*

Because there was one area of her life Aisling had excused herself from talking about. The piece of her past that she had glossed over.

She'd never actually *lied* about it. About Maimeo and Daideo Cooley and why they'd left Ireland. About how little she wanted to think about any of it. She'd never said anything that wasn't true. But she'd never volunteered anything about it either. And she knew, in her heart of hearts, that she was guilty of lying by omission.

If she told them about Jack O'Keane now, and why his name meant so much to her, she'd have to tell them about everything. About all of it. And she couldn't. Not without admitting to her two sons that she had a past that she'd never revealed to them. One that made her feel nauseous to recall.

At two a car swept aggressively onto the drive, breaking into the fog of Aisling's thoughts. She was already in the hall, and went to open the front door. She was unsurprised to see Ethan's friend and occasional band member Matthew Downing emerging from his BMW. He seemed to do everything assertively, ploughing a path for himself in the world as definitively as he'd ploughed two tracks into the gravel. You'd think, to meet him, that he was going places.

Except that he never quite did. Determination and a lot of his father's support had never quite made up for lack of any perceivable musical talent. At twenty-eight he had ten years of solid failure behind him, despite multiple chances coming his way. He'd had meetings with big record labels. Talent

scouts in his audiences. He'd entered countless battles of the band . . . and lost them all.

In other people she might have felt it was simply about luck, but with Matthew – whose wealthy father had tried to manufacture him all the luck in the world – she was positive that it was about not having what it took. Though, of course, that was never the problem according to Matthew. The issue was either the provincial nature of Southampton audiences, or the backward attitude of record labels and their fear of anything new.

Ethan had initially looked up to him, but now just relied on him to step in if he was lacking a bass guitarist or drummer thanks to illness or injury. It was better, Ethan said, than cancelling. But she'd seen her son's disappointment after more than one ragged performance caused by Matthew's failure to keep properly in time.

Aisling tried to paste on a smile as Matthew emerged from his car. His nearly handsome face was amused. He seemed convinced that she found him desperately attractive, which made her feel uncomfortable. She *had* found him strangely appealing when he'd first come to one of Ethan's parties. Something about the heavy eyeliner, skinny jeans and absolute self-belief of the guy had drawn her in. Right up until she'd seen one of his gigs.

'Hi, Matthew,' she said. 'Are you giving my reprobate son a lift?'

'Yeah, it's no bother, Mrs C,' he said, lifting his arms in a stretch as though he'd just driven fifty miles instead of one. 'I'm coming to rehearse anyway in case Nick's wrist isn't mended. I didn't really drink last night, so I'm good for it.' He looked past her into the hall. 'Guessing Ethan's a little . . . fragile.'

'A little,' she said noncommittally. Matthew would take any

opportunity to mock Ethan in front of her, all in the name of apparent humour. Her best response was no response.

She looked towards the stairs, hoping to see Ethan emerging before she had to invite Matthew in, but there was no sign. With a feeling of resignation, she asked, 'Do you want to come in while he gets his stuff?'

'Sure.'

Matthew followed her to the kitchen, somehow managing to occupy most of the large space. It was a talent that her ex-husband had also possessed. An automatic assumption of ownership over everything he surveyed.

'Did you have a good time?' she asked Matthew. 'At the party?'

'Yeah, it was a great night,' Matthew said, leaning back against the countertop. He gave a small smile, one of those smiles of his that implied he knew a lot more than he was saying. 'I mean, some great social time, but some great inspiration too. I managed to record quite a lot of footage for my new video, actually.'

There was a rushed, stumbling thumping, and Ethan erupted into the kitchen, breathless. His hair was still wet from the shower and he was attempting to pull a jacket on.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Didn't hear you come in.'

Matthew cut his eyes from Ethan to Aisling, and gave a very small smile. 'No problem,' he said. 'Just chatting to your lovely mum.'

'Shall we get going?' Ethan said across him, almost before he'd finished speaking, and Aisling found herself looking at her son more carefully. At the tightness in his body. The brightness of his eyes. He seemed ill at ease.

She watched Matthew amble out slowly behind her son, pausing at the door to give her a lazy, self-satisfied wave. And then the door closed behind them and she was left staring at