Friday, 12 February, 21:30

Evening was the hardest time. I couldn't settle. The flat came to feel like a series of rooms I was moving through, over and over, like a clockwork toy on a track: chair, hallway, kitchen, hallway, chair. Hallway, bathroom, bed. Repeat. Evening after evening spent not speaking to another person, not even talking to myself, because my voice rang uncanny off the walls of those rooms. It was winter, pitch-black outside before anyone had left work. The city glowed orange and gave off steam, streetlights like coils in a three-bar heater. I was livid all the time. I couldn't stand myself.

That night, I'd gone for a drive. It wasn't late, maybe nine o'clock, but it had been dark for hours. I found myself in the New Town, autopilot driving, not sure how I'd got myself there or why. It was February, the roads greasy, sleet driving slant against the traffic. In spite of this, George Street was busy with Friday-night drinkers. Big groups of coatless girls, whooping and dashing bare-legged through the sideways weather. I parked on the cobbles with my back to the All Bar One. I felt old that night, oddly responsible for those girls. I felt like someone's dad.

The kid in the Honda Civic pitched up like a rock dropped into the middle of the street. I'd let my mind drift, watching the spatter of sleet on the windscreen, de-mister draining the battery. I heard him first, his speakers' bass setting teeth on edge from a quarter-mile away, then closer: the raspy hiss of his air-compressed gears. At the red light sat a single hatchback,

driven by a woman – from where I'd parked I couldn't make out her face, but imagined her tired, unwinding from a long shift as she drove home. When the kid in the Civic screeched up on her inside and dead-stopped, revving, bumper over the line, I knew already what he was going to do.

I don't know if I fired my own ignition as it happened, or ever so slightly before. The light turned, and the engine of the Civic roared. The cut-up happened fast, the kid slicing diagonally across the lanes; I watched the woman flick the hatchback's nose in time and narrowly escape a crash. She did what I'd have done, what any of us would, and blasted the horn. He asked for it, I thought: visibility was shit, and it was late and dark on a cold, slick road. It shouldn't have surprised him, but apparently it did. He hit the brakes, skidding a good few yards on the glassy setts.

'What the *fuck*, you fucking stupid bitch.'

The kid had rolled his window down and hauled his torso part way out. His throat was a pale flag in the streetlights' glow, an oversize baseball cap pulled over his eyes. He'd stopped the Civic right in the middle of the road: by now I was out of my space and waiting at the roundabout myself.

'You cunt,' he yelled, over his music's crappy bass. He hooked one arm out into the sleet and made an aggressive *come here* gesture. 'Get out of your fucking car, cunt.'

If the woman blinked, she didn't show it. Neatly, she turned the steering wheel and eased the hatchback out across the carriageway, past the kid and his ridiculous car, the way she might've skirted any obstacle. My light had changed, and as I approached, I saw the boy racer chuck his throat and spit, with enough force even in the February wind to land a gob of phlegm on the woman's passenger door. He moved fast, folding himself back in through his window. This time he didn't

rev or spin his wheels, just peeled out with that headache bass cranked up. All she'd done was blow her horn at him, and yet he was going to chase her.

It was surreal, following the two of them down Hanover Street to the Queen Street crossing, which lit up green just as the woman approached. It was a good thing, too, as the kid had glued himself to the hatchback's bumper: I couldn't see exactly, but the gap must have been inches wide, perilously close to a shunt. Had the woman braked at all, he'd have piled into the back of her. He'd flashed his full-beam headlamps up, throwing dazzle in her mirrors. Other motorists bearing witness didn't seem to bother him. His music was so loud it thudded through the road, my own steering wheel buzzing to its beat.

As she headed downhill on Dundas Street, the woman slowed to a near crawl. She might have been trying to annoy him, but I felt it more likely she was terrified. The kid was a bona fide dangerous driver, risking his own safety as well as hers. At low speed, at least, the crash that seemed almost inevitable would be mild. A paint job, maybe. A dent. But I doubted she was thinking of her car right then. She was being menaced: the kid's driving was a clear-cut threat.

'Pass her,' I hissed through my teeth. 'You've made your point.'

But the kid didn't let up. Together, we eased round the long bend at Brandon Street, slow as a funeral cortège, the Honda Civic still practically brushing the bodywork of the hatchback. At the Huntly Street junction, the lights were red, and the woman slowed to a dead crawl in order to force a stop. I saw her indicate left, and then the kid put on his reversing lights. I doubted he knew I was there or even checked for vehicles behind, but I was glad of the few feet of space I'd left between

my bonnet and his idiotic spoiler. He rolled back far enough to steer the Civic's nose into the road, then purred into the right-hand lane. His tyres were on the white dividing line, his car's flank right up against the hatchback. In what I hoped was a show of solidarity, I closed the gap between the back of the woman's car and my own.

Of course, the kid zipped down the window on his passenger side. I could see him leaning over, one arm braced against the steering wheel, to yell at the woman whose head didn't turn, who kept on gazing straight ahead. I imagined her knuckles white, her mouth a thin line of grim resolve.

'I told you, get out of the fucking car.'

The woman didn't respond. I saw the kid twist to turn down his music, a gesture so ridiculous I might have smiled, had this been a film I was watching and not an active crime scene.

'Don't *fucking* ignore me, bitch!' The kid put his foot on the accelerator, and I heard the Civic's exhaust rattle underneath the engine's roar. 'I'm gonna fuck you up, you hear? Get out of the car.'

The light was still red. A 27 bus turned right from the box, its two decks full of blue light, like a steamed-up fridge. Still, the woman didn't respond. I remember looking down at my phone, which was sitting propped in the cupholder. I remember thinking I could have dialled 999. Could have done the right thing. The correct thing.

The kid was still yelling.

'You don't *get* to ignore me!' By this time it was practically a shriek, his rage a live, vibrating thing. 'You're *gonna* get out of that car, you cunt. I'm gonna follow you home.'

Almost before he'd said it, I pictured the scene. I hoped this woman had a man at home, some six-foot-four-inch bastard with a mean streak. I thought of him kicking seven shades of

shit out of this weaselly kid. That rare thing, instant karma: the idea thrilled me, almost turned me on. I saw that my palms were slick against the wheel.

The light changed, and the woman behaved in a way I hadn't foreseen. From a standing start, she shot off into the night, turning right instead of left, taking the corner on two wheels and very definitely speeding. She was hoping to outrun him, I realised, and it might have worked: the kid wasn't as quick to get off his clutch – I could tell she'd flummoxed him. But I knew he had the superior car, with its souped-up racing accoutrements. She wouldn't lose him easily, and I guessed then that there was no man at home, no one to scare the boy racer off once he caught up with her. My pulse banged about in my head.

'That's *enough*,' I heard myself say.

I lit out of the junction after the Civic. The woman's little car had already pulled ahead, passing the crossing at Rodney Street and toiling on up the hill. The noise of the kid's car turned the heads of the cabbies parked up in their rows at the Canonmills garage: he'd turned his music up once more, its bass a beating I was sick of taking. At Rodney Street the light turned amber but the kid sailed through, already gaining ground on the hatchback. I tried to imagine what he thought he was going to do, thought of the weapons his stupid trussed-up car might contain. Was he carrying a blade, or worse? Up the road, the woman was indicating – a reflex, I assumed, though she was running for her life – to turn left into East Claremont Street. In the beat before the crossing traffic's light turned green, I too flicked on my indicator, and jumped the red. East Claremont Street had speed traps, but Broughton Road did not. I wouldn't even need to push it all that much to beat them to the other end of the block.

At no point did I question what I was doing. There was no voice in my head that said *stop*. In fact, after weeks of scuffing around my flat, I finally felt alive. I'd just run a traffic light, I was picking up speed on a 20mph road, and I had no idea what I'd do with the Honda Civic kid once I caught him. But I was going to catch him. Because this felt good. Because I'd had *enough*.

Broughton Road was quiet, every light green, which felt like a sign I was doing the right thing, like the city itself was on my side. My speedo needle hit sixty and I realised I'd have to ease off if I wanted to make East Claremont Street in one piece.

Thankfully, there was no vehicle coming in the opposite direction as I jackknifed across the carriageway and made the turn. As the wheels came off the tarmac and on to the new street's greasy cobbles, I felt my front tyres skid. Immediately, I made my hands lighter on the wheel, steering into the slide and righting things. I knew how to do this, how to make a car behave exactly as I wanted – I used to love driving, had I forgotten? I realised in that moment I couldn't remember when I last felt so awake.

The kid in the Civic had caught up with his victim: up ahead, I could see the headlights of the hatchback moving slowly towards me, back down at that defensive, crawling speed. As I approached, my own dipped beams caught the female driver's terrified face. Her eyes were on the rear-view, her mouth ragged and chewing on words I couldn't hear. I imagined her chanting *leave me alone, leave me alone*, the kid's aggressive music humming under everything.

They say when two cars collide, the worst part about it is the sound. They're right. I knew what was coming and braced for it, but it still hurt, the screech of bending metal

like a toothache. Without really thinking, I'd wrenched the handbrake on and pivoted at some speed into the side of the Civic. I watched as my bonnet ploughed into the driver's door and it crumpled, like a sheet of paper drawn into a fire. In a split second, I glimpsed the kid's shocked face, his eyes shark-black and angry, before the driver's side window gave, the glass crazing all at once to a sheet of TV static. My body was jolted by the impact, making my spine crunch. The Civic slid sideways; I felt its hubcaps shatter as the impact shunted its passenger-side wheels up on to the pavement. My own car was straddling the carriageway. My head buzzed, and as my mouth filled with something slick and sour, I realised I'd bitten my tongue. A long diagonal crease pushed up out of my bonnet, though I could see the Civic had come off worse. The street was quiet, but a hundred residential windows looked down on this length of it. I knew the noise of the crash would have drawn witnesses to those windows, and for the first time, I felt a snicker of fear. I put my car in reverse and backed it out of the collision, the Civic's bodywork making a crumpled-tinfoil sound. I wondered if the kid was hurt, and realised I hoped so as blood trickled into my throat. The Honda Civic was written off: the fundamental structure of it had bent, and I guessed its shove on to the pavement wouldn't have done the suspension much good. Even if the kid was unhurt, he wasn't going to drive away. I felt smug. I'd done it. I'd punished him.

I manoeuvred into position to drive away, but hesitated. I realised the woman's hatchback was nowhere to be seen: in the minute-or-so it had taken to run the kid off the road, his victim had disappeared into the night. I wondered if she'd paused at all, if she'd stopped to watch me ram the Civic and deliver her out of harm's way, or if she'd

simply high-tailed it into the dark. I didn't much care – I assumed she felt gratitude towards me, I didn't need to have it explicitly given. Indeed, I was glad she hadn't stuck around, hadn't parked the hatchback with its hazards on and run back in the rain to see if I was okay. It made what came next easier. It helped me commit what I only realised later was a hit and run.

Monday, 12 July, 08:50

Helen Birch had always hated relying on other people. She'd had to train Anjan, her partner, out of opening the car door for her, back when they first started seeing each other. Though he protested it was meant to be charming, part of the way he'd been raised, she argued it made her feel geriatric. People opened car doors for old ladies, not perfectly capable forty-year-old women. Besides, *she'd* been raised by a single mother who'd trusted nothing, double-checked everything, and would have sucked her teeth at anything resembling chivalry.

'I'm led to believe my father was charming, once,' Birch had told Anjan, when he expressed dismay at her inherited cynicism. 'Didn't amount to much in the long run, did it? He left her all on her own with two kids to raise.'

They'd had a half-hearted fight, during which Anjan had agreed to stop opening doors for her. She'd forgotten all about that fight until now, sitting in the pristine leather interior of Anjan's Lexus. She watched as he unfolded himself from the driver's seat, walked around the front of the car, and arrived at the passenger-side door. As he opened it, she zipped off her seatbelt, then handed Anjan her one ugly hospital crutch. It rattled as he juggled it upright on the pavement.

'You don't have to do that,' Birch said, shuffling her still-good leg into position, then hauling herself up out of the car. The crutch teetered as she moved her weight on to it,

but Anjan steadied her, keeping one hand on her elbow. 'I'm almost better. I can manage.'

Their faces were close, as though they were dancing. Anjan bent his head and kissed her on the nose.

'Helen,' he said, 'how many times have I said it? You need to learn how to accept help.'

Birch rolled her eyes, but she was smiling back. She leaned forward a little on the crutches, and they creaked.

'I don't *need* help,' she said, 'I'm good.'

Anjan nodded, and stepped away. As he moved, Birch noticed the thin shadow the crutch cast on the pale, flagged New Town pavement. It was still early, the sun just climbing above the neat slate roofs. She'd had a coffee but wanted another – wanted a whisky, if she was honest – to stop her hand from shaking on the stick's rubber grip. She was nervous about the hour ahead of her, wondering even now if there was some way she could back out. Anjan had closed the car door behind her. Now he was beside her again, holding her bag aloft by its strap. Without a word, Birch dipped her head and let him drape the bag over her shoulder. She *didn't* need help, but she'd make this small concession.

'I can stay, if you like,' Anjan said. 'You know I cleared the diary this morning. I can sit right here in the car and wait until you come out.'

Birch snorted.

'We've been over this,' she said, 'and I told you not to be daft. You might have cleared the diary, but you and I both know you've a metric ton of work to do. I'll be fine. It's only an hour, and then I'll call a cab. No need for you to chauffeur me about.'

'I don't mind, Helen. I want to look after you.'

Birch closed her eyes, just for a moment. The July sunlight left a pink print on her retinas as she opened them again.

'I know,' she said, keeping her voice level. 'And I love you for it. But I promise, I can do this. I'll be fine.'

For a second or two, she thought Anjan might argue. But then she saw his shoulders sag, just slightly, and she knew she'd won.

'Very well,' he said, in his lawyerish way. 'But you know, if you need me, then—'

'—don't hesitate to phone.' Birch grinned. *If you need me, then don't hesitate to phone* had been Anjan's mantra ever since she'd been discharged from hospital, hobbling on her hated crutches. Even when she'd proven to him she could manage with only one, he kept on saying it, like he thought she was still an invalid – like he couldn't see the progress she'd made. He wouldn't stop *fussing*. But she kept up the grin.

'I know,' she said. 'And I won't.'

Anjan lifted his hand and brushed a chunk of Birch's fringe out of her eyes.

'Good,' he said. 'I hope it goes well, and she's kind. Don't be overly hard on yourself, all right?'

'All right,' Birch chimed, mimicking his upbeat tone. She liked feeling his hand against her face – wanted to reach up and hold it there, but her own hand was on the grip of the crutch. 'I'll try my best. I mean, how bad can it be? It's just therapy.'

Anjan smiled.

'Yes,' he said. 'It'll help you get better, like any medicine.'

Birch waited until he'd kissed her and they'd said goodbye – until he'd got back in the Lexus, started the engine and driven away – before she let the smile fade from her face. Making Anjan believe she was fine felt more important than actually *being* it, she realised, and it made her frown. That seemed like the sort of thing a therapist might want her to address.

She was relieved to find the entrance to the consulting room was level access: though she'd had a few weeks' practice and had mastered a sort of crab-step up and down, stairs were still annoying. The door of the Georgian townhouse in front of her bore a small brass plaque which read *Dr Jane Ryan, MBACP*. Birch took a deep breath. She was in the right place.

She buzzed the intercom and leaned towards it, expecting she'd need to announce herself. But after a crackle of static, the door made its telltale *thunk* sound, and gave when she pushed against it. The door was heavy, and she was already breathing hard, when she became aware of another person standing close to her.

'Please, let me get that.'

On the threshold was a petite woman with pale, close-cropped hair. As Birch straightened up, she noticed there wasn't much difference between them in terms of age, which surprised her. She'd expected a much older Dr Jane Ryan – someone head-teacherish. The real Dr Jane Ryan looked unexpectedly cool. She looked like someone who might once have been in a band.

'Helen, right?'

Birch clattered into the tiled hallway, the door swinging shut behind her.

'Right. Dr Ryan?'

'Call me Jane.' The woman looked her up and down. Birch wondered if she was going to have to faff around with the stick in order to shake hands, but after a moment, the other woman said, 'Why don't you come through and get sat down?'

Birch followed Dr Jane – *just Jane*, she thought, though the title seemed somehow necessary – into what must once have been this Georgian townhouse's living room. Everything was typically Edinburgh: an elegant fireplace, painted white,

dominated the room, and in one corner there was an old press that someone – Dr Jane herself, perhaps – had converted into bookshelves. The many books had titles like *In Therapy* and *A Grief Observed*. A wide bay window looked out on to the street, though the lower panes were frosted for privacy. The carpet was thick, muffling the stopper of Birch's stick.

'Take a pew,' Dr Jane said, gesturing to an armchair on the far side of the fireplace. There was a side table next to it with a box of tissues, and a glass of water Birch almost upended as she half toppled from vertical to seated.

'Sorry,' she said, propping her crutch against the chair's broad arm. 'I'm getting better at this every day, but sometimes my hip just doesn't want to play ball.'

Dr Jane was smiling. Birch noticed she had a dimple on one side of her face, but not the other.

'Don't you worry,' she said. 'I imagine it's frustrating for you. Are you in a lot of pain?'

Birch blinked. She hadn't expected this difficult a question up front. Anjan had asked it a lot when she first came out of hospital, and her response had often been a lie.

'I'm all right just now,' she said. This, at least, was true: it wasn't long since breakfast, when she'd taken her meds. Birch believed it was important to tell the truth in therapy. 'And it's so much better now that it was even a couple of weeks ago.'

'How about walking? How's the physio going?'

Birch laughed.

'I thought I was here to talk about my head,' she said, 'not this useless leg.'

Dr Jane arched one pale eyebrow.

'Well, yes,' she said, 'but I'm pretty sure you know that a physical injury can mess with your head, DI Birch.'

As if prompted, a whisper of pain drifted through Birch's hip. *Don't start*, she thought.

'I guess,' she said. 'I guess it can. But I'm managing it. Like I said, I'm so much better than I was.'

There was a pause, during which she felt as though Dr Jane took a mental note.

'Have you ever attended counselling before?' she asked.

Birch shook her head.

'It was mooted, once,' she replied. 'I worked on the Three Rivers case.'

Dr Jane nodded.

'The college shooting. That must have been hard. You felt like you needed help, back then?'

'No.' Birch worried she'd said it a little too quickly. 'It was offered to me, is all. I turned it down. Decided I could manage.'

She watched as the smaller woman glanced away, reaching for a tablet with a brushed-steel case.

'Well,' she said, 'as you've never done this before, I'll start by asking if you have any questions about the agreement I sent you. Did everything look okay?'

Birch thought back to the Word document Dr Jane had emailed her, and shook her head.

'It all seemed very straightforward,' she said. 'I was more than happy to sign it.'

Dr Jane smiled.

'Good. But you should feel free to ask any questions at any time. That agreement can always be revisited. In addition, I'd like to suggest that we have a sort of review session every so often – maybe once every six weeks? Just so we can discuss your progress, really.'

Birch felt her own eyebrows shoot up. It hadn't occurred to her that she might be doing this for as long as six weeks.

'That sounds fine,' she croaked.

'Great. Final question, before we get started. You saw the part in the agreement where I requested that you keep a therapeutic journal?'

Birch sagged a little.

'I did. That's compulsory, right?'

Dr Jane made a *hmm* face, though she didn't make the sound.

'It doesn't have to be. But I'd like you to try it out, just in between the first few sessions. If you find you hate it, that's okay.'

There was a small silence, into which Birch eventually spoke.

'Will I have to write . . . lots? Are you expecting all my deepest and darkest secrets?'

Dr Jane laughed: a warm, musical laugh that sounded genuine.

'Not at all,' she replied. 'Once you click on the link, you'll see there's a sort of form in there. It asks you to select your mood from a drop-down menu. Then there's a box to write comments. You can write ten words, or a thousand. It's entirely up to you. It's really just a tool I use to track progress. And it's completely confidential, I'd never share the contents of those journals – unless in the specific circumstances outlined in the agreement.'

'If you think I intend to commit a crime,' Birch said, grinning.

'It's that,' Dr Jane replied, 'or if I suspect you of intending to harm yourself or others.'

'Seems unlikely.'

Dr Jane laughed again.

'I agree.'

Birch felt the smile slide off her face. She realised she couldn't put it off any longer: the actual therapy side of things

was about to begin. Across from her, Dr Jane opened up the tablet and began to skim down a document.

'So . . . I've got your file here,' she said.

'Uh-oh,' Birch replied. It was meant to be a joke but as she said it, she wished she could bite down on the sound, take it back.

'Nothing to worry about.' Dr Jane was still smiling. *She's nice*, Birch told herself, *this woman is nice, Helen, you can relax*. It didn't really work. 'In fact,' Dr Jane went on, 'I owe you a bit of an apology. I'm sorry it's taken so long to get you here, I know you've been waiting weeks. The wheels of police bureaucracy turn slowly, sometimes.'

'Don't I know it.'

'I'm sure you do.' Dr Jane paused, looking down at the tablet's glowing screen. 'Okay, here we are. Right. Why don't you start by telling me a bit about what's brought you here.'

'I'm sorry?'

'I'd like to know why you've come to see me. What's been going on for you over the past few weeks.'

Birch frowned.

'Isn't that all there in the file?'

Dr Jane's face wore a non-committal expression.

'Of course, but the file has the official version. I want to hear *your* version of events.'

Birch closed her eyes, letting an internal film-reel start up in her mind, jerky but horribly familiar. The cramped, ruined house. A gunshot, then darkness. The thrum of a helicopter. Pain snaking through the lower half of her body like a black vine. Terror so thick she could almost smell it.

'Okay,' she said, opening her eyes again, but curling her hands around the arms of her chair, as though to steady

herself. 'Well, as I'm sure you know, on the 4th June, I was part of what became known as Operation Kendall, in the Scottish Borders.'

'Yes. And what was Operation Kendall? What can you tell me about it?'

Dr Jane had fixed her with a still, pale gaze. Birch cast around the room for something to look at, something to focus on so she wouldn't need to meet the other woman's eye.

'It started in the town of Kelso,' she said. 'We got reports that there had been a spree shooting at the Border Union Showground, and that the gunman – a guy named Gerald Hodgson – was at large. A manhunt was launched by some of the Borders divisions, and my team were put on standby to provide support. As the morning went on, we found out that Hodgson hadn't just shot up the showground. Before arriving there, he'd been to his ex-partner's house.' Birch paused. The crime scene photos came to her mind's eye unbidden, as she had known they would. But she pressed on. 'Her name was Sophie Lowther. He'd forced his way into the house and shot both Sophie and her husband. As he fled the scene, he snatched the couple's three-year-old daughter, Elise.'

Dr Jane was nodding. She'd known all of this before Birch even walked in the door.

'So,' Dr Jane said, 'I realise it goes without saying, but . . . this was not a regular day at the office?'

Birch gave a short laugh. She found herself recalling all the times she'd joked to people that there was no such thing as a regular day at the office, not for a member of police personnel. But then she noticed that a silence had opened up in the room, and realised that Dr Jane really did expect her to answer the question.

'Not at all,' she said. 'I mean, it wasn't *the* worst day I've ever had, but it was up there. I ended up personally involved with this particular case in a way I never have been before.'

'Hodgson singled you out.'

Birch nodded.

'After he left the showfield,' she said, 'he ran, but not very far. He took himself off to a place called Seefew, a remote pasture in the hills up the Bowmont Valley. From there, he called to make contact with the police. Or rather, he called to make contact with me.'

'And how did that feel?'

How do you think? Birch thought, though she didn't say it. What was she meant to say? Tell you what, Dr Jane, when it happened, I honestly thought I might throw up, right there in my CO's corner office.

'Terrifying,' she heard her own voice say. 'And bewildering. I had no idea why he'd chosen me to be his contact – in fact, I'm still not one hundred per cent sure. I guess I never will be. But suddenly I was thrust into the centre of this operation. Suddenly I was driving down there, psyching myself up to be sent into a building with this man.'

Dr Jane had glanced down at her screen.

'You conducted the negotiation,' she said, as though reading it.

Birch shrugged.

'If you can call it that. I went in and talked to him.'

'Alone?'

'Yes. Wearing a wire, but on my own.'

Dr Jane flipped her gaze back to Birch's face.

'I can't think of a better way to word this question, but – how did it go?'

Birch winced, looking away.

'Badly,' she said. She could hear the sting in her own voice, the sharpness of it. 'I guess you must know the outcome.'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dr Jane tilt her head.

'I know that you successfully moved the little girl out of harm's way. You negotiated the release of Hodgson's hostage.'

Birch tightened her grip on the chair arms. Another spark of pain – small, but persistent – untethered itself from the wound at her hip and wandered across her abdomen, making her teeth clench. She'd heard this could happen, that stress could make you hurt, but she'd never fully believed it until now.

'It wasn't quite like that, though,' she said. 'She wasn't a hostage, not exactly. She was . . . how can I explain this? Taking Elise was a mistake, he knew that. It was one of a series of mistakes he'd made that day. He claimed he didn't intend to do any of the things he did. He talked like he wasn't in control.'

'Did you believe him?'

Birch tried not to wince at the question. Dr Jane's eyes were still fixed on her, but she couldn't meet them. Instead, she looked at the fireplace. In its grate was a white enamel jug which held a bouquet of pale blue hydrangea blossoms. You had to bury nails at the root to make them grow that colour, she remembered her mother telling her. Acid soil for blue, alkaline for pink. She was aware that silence was slowly filling up the room once more. She was going to have to speak.

'I found that whole thing very difficult,' she said. 'Deciding whether or not to believe him was maybe the most difficult thing of all. I couldn't reconcile the idea that a person could commit murder and then claim it was all a big mistake.' The hydrangea petals were almost too perfect. Birch couldn't tell if the flowers were real or silk. 'I didn't know if I believed that

someone could black out, then come to and discover they'd spent fifteen minutes randomly firing a shotgun at people.'

'But?' Dr Jane leaned forward slightly in her chair.

'But . . . I guess he did seem so – I'm not sure what the word is. Unmoored, I guess. Deeply erratic. He was in the room with me, but he was also miles away, both at the same time. There were moments where I looked in his eyes, and I couldn't see anyone behind them.' The words made Birch look back at Dr Jane. It felt necessary to add something more, to underline things. 'As if he'd left his body,' she said.

'That must have been hard, when you were trying to negotiate. Trying to reach him.'

Birch nodded. She realised a lump was forming in her throat, and she tried to swallow it down.

'It was. I don't think I succeeded. I don't think I did enough.'

Now Dr Jane was frowning, her cropped hairline seeming to shift as her face creased.

'What makes you say that?'

'Well.' Birch made a kind of snort noise, though she wasn't laughing. She pointed to her hip. 'I guess you know that he shot me.'

'Yes,' Dr Jane said, softly. 'Yes, I did know that.'

'And you'll also know that he was then shot dead by one of the specialist firearms officers on the scene.' Once again, Birch tried to push down the lump in her throat. I will not cry, she thought. I *won't*. But she could hear the threat of tears in her voice when she spoke again. 'I'd say that outcome indicates a pretty fundamental failure on my part.'

'Just to be clear,' Dr Jane said, her voice still gentle, 'you feel it was your fault that Hodgson was shot?'

'Yes.' The answer seemed too sharp, seemed to puncture something between them. But Birch couldn't help it: that tone was simply the honed edge of her own certainty.

Dr Jane straightened up in her seat.

'But Helen,' she said, '*you* didn't shoot him. Nor did you give the order to fire the shot that killed him.'

Birch looked down at her right hand, hooked around the chair arm. Its knuckles were pale.

'No, but . . . look, you don't get to shoot a police officer and get away with it. It was him shooting me that led to his death.'

Dr Jane let out a short, flat laugh.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but . . . you feel it was your fault that *you* were shot?'

Birch felt a shiver at the back of her neck. She bristled.

'Yes,' she said, 'completely. Yes. It feels very obvious to me, in fact, and I'll be honest, I'm not really sure what's funny about it. I made a mistake in the negotiation process. I told Hodgson a lie, and then he found me out and got angry.'

Birch realised her voice had become raised. The fireplace echoed: *angry, angry*. She watched Dr Jane to see how she'd react, but the other woman's face didn't change.

'Helen,' Dr Jane said, gently, 'is it possible that you feel you *deserve* what happened to you?'

Birch blinked. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. She turned the question over in her mind, like a coin whose currency she didn't recognise.

'Yes,' she said, the word drawn out long, distorted. 'Yes, I think I did deserve it. I do deserve it. I deserve all of this.'

'Because you made a mistake.'

'It was a bad mistake.'

'Some people might call it that. Other people might say it was a split-second judgement made in a very high-pressure situation.'

Birch gave her head a short, fast shake, as though trying to dislodge something.

'That's just semantics,' she said, that certain edge returning to her voice. 'A man died. A man died because of a mistake I made.'

Dr Jane glanced down at her tablet, then pointed to it, looking back at Birch.

'I've read up about this case,' she said. 'I know there's been some speculation that Gerald Hodgson actually wanted to die. That it was his intention to commit suicide by cop.'

Birch straightened up, just a little, in her chair.

'I've read those takes, too,' she said.

'You don't agree with them.'

'No, I don't think I do.' She could hear that sharpness still in her voice and didn't like it, but couldn't seem to make it go away. 'And you know, I'm not looking to be let off the hook, here. I don't want to be placated, by you or anyone. Decisions I made led to a man – a vulnerable man, someone who, no matter what he was guilty of, was in crisis – losing his life. That's not something I can just shrug off.'

'Of course not. I don't think anyone would suggest that.'

There was a pause. Birch's hip ached. She realised she felt exhausted, emptied out by this short exchange.

'Well, good,' she said.

'But this is useful,' Dr Jane went on, 'knowing how you feel about Operation Kendall. It seems to me that you're carrying quite a lot of guilt and blame around with you. I don't for one moment believe you should simply shrug that off or try to ignore it. But I do think we can work on it in these sessions.

Work towards helping you reframe that, maybe. Shoulder it a little easier.'

Birch was quiet, though she knew she was going to have to speak. Something had been nagging at her, ever since Dr Jane had told her that she'd read her file.

'I assume you've spoken to my commanding officer.'

Dr Jane nodded.

'Yes. DCI McLeod and I have had a couple of conversations. He's helped in the organisation of these meetings.'

Birch raised one eyebrow.

'That would explain the delay,' she said, almost to herself.

'I'm sorry?'

'Never mind, just a joke.'

Dr Jane fixed her with a look.

'You're not on good terms with DCI McLeod?'

Oh Jesus, Birch thought. Now look what you've done.

'Really,' she said, 'it was just a joke.'

Dr Jane wasn't laughing, but her face softened a little.

'I'm not going to tell on you, Helen. I want you to be able to speak freely.'

Birch gave another shake of the head. *Stop being defensive*, she told herself. But she couldn't seem to stop.

'The guv and I get on fine. I'm a bit of a thorn in his side – sometimes I get out of line and he has to rein me back in.' She lifted a hand and waved it as she spoke, as though trying to bat the whole topic away. 'That's all.'

'It's interesting to note where you're placing the blame, there.'

Birch paused, her hand still held in mid-air.

'Blame?'

Dr Jane nodded.

'I asked if you were on good terms. You answered by telling me the ways in which you think DCI McLeod finds you difficult.'

Carefully, Birch lowered her hand again. She wanted to argue – *no, I didn't* – but realised Dr Jane was right.

'What about the other direction?' Dr Jane asked. 'Do you ever find DCI McLeod difficult?'

Birch wanted to laugh out loud, but knew that would be wrong. If I had a penny, she thought, for every time I've found my boss difficult . . .

'I think everyone finds him a bit difficult at times,' she said. 'But he's my CO. It's not my job to appraise him.'

Dr Jane made an *okay, sure* face.

'I'm not asking you to do an appraisal, though. What do you find difficult about working with him?'

Before she could stop herself, Birch let out a sigh. Why the *hell,* she thought, did you raise the issue of McLeod? Why?

'I'll be honest, I was more comfortable talking about how my actions inadvertently got someone killed,' she said. She aimed for a laugh and just about made it. 'Sentences I never thought I'd say.'

Dr Jane leaned back then, as if to look at Birch from a slightly farther distance.

'That's okay,' she said. 'We don't have to talk about it now if you don't want to.'

Birch let herself exhale, but at the same time she registered surprise, like a light coming on in her head. This was therapy: she hadn't realised not talking about things was allowed.

'I would like to know, though . . .' Birch heard the words come out of her mouth, and realised she'd been wanting to say them ever since she walked through the door. 'I mean, I've been wondering . . .'

She tailed off, looking at Dr Jane. In response, Dr Jane somehow did something that made her face open up, made it say *tell me anything. I'll wait.*

'Wondering what?'

Birch flinched her hands into her lap and looked down at them.

'I mean,' she said, 'I don't know if it's appropriate for me to ask, or if it's something you're even allowed to tell me, but . . . why am I here? When you spoke to McLeod, what reasons did he give for requesting these sessions?'

On the edge of her vision, she saw Dr Jane shift her weight, leaning forward again. For a brief second, Birch thought the other woman might try to take hold of her hand.

'You were badly wounded in the line of duty,' Dr Jane said. 'You were shot, Helen. Operation Kendall was a pretty traumatic event for you. Don't you think that merits being referred for counselling?'

Birch was still looking down at her hands. She didn't know how to feel about the fact that Dr Jane had not, after all, reached over to touch her.

'Maybe,' she said. 'But I'm surprised that McLeod – well, for want of a better phrase, I'm amazed he believes in this stuff. Therapy, I mean. It surprised me that he'd signed off on it.'

'There's a note of something in your voice when you say it surprised you.'

'Is there?'

'Suspicion, maybe. Are you suspicious of DCI McLeod?'

Birch pressed the outside edges of her thumbs together. The nails were bitten down – a new thing, something she'd started doing while she sat awake at night, these past few weeks – and she hated the look of them.

'I . . . think he may have other reasons to send me here. Beyond the fact that I was shot, etcetera.'

Dr Jane did her head-tilt thing.

'What do you think those reasons might be?'

Quiet opened out between them again. Birch wasn't thinking, she was merely pretending to think. She didn't want Dr Jane to know how long she'd spent angsting about this.

'I'm worried he thinks I'm a loose cannon. That I'm trouble.'

'Trouble? In what way?'

Birch buried her thumbs inside her fists, to hide the ragged nails.

'I argue too much,' she said, 'or I don't follow orders, not the way he'd like me to. I make snap decisions. I get too involved.'

Dr Jane was waiting, Birch could tell. She knew there was something more waiting to be said.

'I'm worried he thinks I'm not cut out to be a police officer.'

The sentence hung like a cloud in the clear, high-ceilinged sky of the room. Birch couldn't quite believe she'd said the words, though doing so felt like putting down something heavy.

After a few seconds, Dr Jane spoke.

'Let me take DCI McLeod out of the equation for just a moment,' she said. 'Because really, you can't know what DCI McLeod thinks of you or feels about you, not with any definite accuracy. So what you're really saying is, *you're* worried you're not cut out to be a police officer.'

Birch stared down at her own fists, balled in her lap. She realised this was the pose of a defiant child. She could feel her eyes prickling.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' Dr Jane said.

The lump in her throat was back, and this time, Birch let it rise. When she finally spoke, her voice was hoarse and wet.

'No,' she said. 'You're not wrong.'