

## **KAREN**

In the bar, Karen drinking vodka-tonic, Ray on brandy to calm his nerves, she told him how people react to death and a stick-up in pretty much the same way: shock, disbelief, anger, acceptance.

'The trick being,' Karen said, 'to skip them past the anger straight into acceptance.'

'So you just walk up the aisle—'

'A side aisle. Never the main one.'

'That's why I didn't see you coming,' Ray said. 'So you came up the side aisle, wearing a bike helmet.'

'Always. Visor down. Tinted.'

'Naturally. And carrying, it looked like to me, a Mag .44.'

'Correct.'

'But you still say "Excuse me?" at the counter?'

'That's so no one gets excited. Least of all me.'

'So you've got their attention. Now what?'

'I ask if they have kids. Usually they do. Most nights I don't even have to rack the slide.'

'Lucky me,' Ray said. He sipped some brandy, watching Karen over the rim of the glass. 'Should I feel privileged you just couldn't help shooting at me?'

'I was aiming wide,' she said.

'You still fired.'

'See it my way. You came out of nowhere. Snuck up.'

'I was trying to get a strawberry Cornetto from the bottom of the freezer.' He lit a cigarette. 'Then, I stand up, I nearly get my head blown off.'

Karen had seen him late, in her peripheral vision, Ray coming up fast as if he were lunging. So she'd half-turned and squeezed, dry-firing. It was over before he even knew it was on.

Except what Karen remembered best was his eyes in the split-second when he realised what had just happened. How they got clearer but stayed perfectly still. Tigery eyes, gold flecks in hazel. Karen, knowing he couldn't see her face behind the helmet's visor, had been tempted to wink.

Then the Chinese guy behind the counter had said: 'I just locked up. The money's in the safe. All I got is bags of change.'

'Gimme your wallet,' she'd said, and checked the driver's licence for his address. 'I know where you live,' she'd told the Chinese guy, tossing the wallet back onto the counter. The Chinese guy shrugged, glanced at his watch.

Outside on the forecourt, Ray standing there with his shoulders loose, a strawberry Cornetto in his hand, Karen'd said: 'Fancy a drink?'

And Ray'd said: 'Okay by me.'

## RAY

Karen had a place where she dumped the bike after a job. Ray had said he'd follow on, catch her up at the bar. Now they were sitting at the corner of the L-shaped counter, Ray on the short leg of the L with his back to the wall so he could watch the door. Karen bolted down the first vodka-tonic, ordered another and a coffee for Ray. 'So what do you do, Ray?' she said.

'I'm retired.'

'Okay for you. What're you retired from?'

'Baby-sitting.'

'You're a baby-sitter?'

'Not anymore. I quit. What about you, you're a full-time blagger?'

'Nope. Tell me more about the baby-sitting.'

Ray caught a gleam in her eye, and they were nice eyes to start with.

'The guy I work for,' he said, 'that I *worked* for, sometimes he needs people held a while. I'm the one does the holding.'

'Held?'

'Sometimes people owe money and they're in no hurry to pay up. Or you'll have a job where an inside is needed, the guy who can access the security code. So you snatch someone he knows. Wives, mainly. Kids can get messy.'

'And you take good care of these wives.'

'No one's ever complained.'

'Nice job.'

'You're the one brings a Mag .44 to work.'

'You don't use a gun?'

'Not always. Depends on the circumstances. Some people adapt better than others.'

'I thought no one ever complained.'

'Mostly they're gagged.'

Karen sipped some vodka-tonic. 'So how come you're retired?'

'It was jump or be shoved. The Fridge checked out. A new shylock took over.'

'The Fridge?'

'The guy liked to eat.'

'What happened to him?'

'What happens every fridge,' Ray said. 'Bottom of a canal, punctured.'

## FRANK

To work with human flesh, Frank would tell his patients, to work *in* human flesh, is a privilege that allows a humble surgeon to aspire to the status of an artist. Moreover, the trust that existed between the artist and his living clay was unique. Michelangelo, Frank would say with a self-deprecating nod to the bust of the Renaissance master in the corner of his consultation suite, never had to worry about whether or not the marble trusted *him*.

At which point the nervous patient—already dizzy with premonitions of needles, scalpels and the strong probability of public ridicule—would rush to assure Frank of her complete faith in Frank’s abilities, and Frank would reluctantly slide the release forms across his mahogany desk.

Those were the times when Frank felt most alive. In control of his destiny, a man who was making that elusive difference.

This was not one of those times.

‘You’re actually serious,’ he said, keeping his voice low with some difficulty as he leaned across the table.

‘It’s foolproof,’ Bryan said airily, tapping imaginary ash from his unlit Ritmeester. ‘Cast-iron. Lockdown of the year, I’d call it.’

‘Okay. That much I’m not disputing. What I’m asking is, are you serious? Or are you, y’know, back dropping acid again?’

‘Jesus, Frank. Keep it down.’ Bryan glanced over his shoulder as he tightened the marble-sized knot in his tie. He hunched closer and put his elbows on the table, which caused his slender glass of Czech import to wobble precariously. ‘It’s all there in the small print, Frank. It’s not like we’re doing anything illegal.’

‘The whole fucking *point* is it’s illegal,’ Frank whispered hoarsely.

Like, if it wasn’t illegal, why were they whispering in a remote booth of the Members’ Bar? Frank tried to remember if he’d ever strayed this far from the bar before but he couldn’t come up with a single reason why he might have wanted to.

He watched, fuming, as Bryan clipped the cigar. ‘I ask you to, y’know, stop the bitch from crippling me, swiping everyfuckingthing. And this is the best you can do?’

Bryan pinched a crease in his pants. ‘Relax, Frank. They were bound to find a loophole or two.’

‘A loophole? The pre-nup’s a *fishing* net, Bry. The guy’s pouring through *every* which fucking way.’

Frank still couldn’t get his head around how Margaret’s lawyer was on his case, working overtime the last six months, a labour of love, the guy coming

on like red ants. Not for the first time, Frank was haunted by the spectre of Margaret screwing her lawyer so she could screw Frank by proxy.

Meanwhile, Frank was stuck with Bry the ex-hippy burn-out, this on the basis of Oakwood’s code of etiquette, which stated—as firmly as it was possible for any unwritten rule to state—that it’s bad form to cut any of your regular four-ball partners out of the loop.

‘I’ve told you already, Frank,’ Bryan said. ‘My hands are tied. Maybe if you’d told me about the pre-nup before I went into conference ...’ He winced. ‘Cigar?’

Frank shook his head and began shredding a beermat. Bryan lit up, exhaled an acrid cloud. ‘The best bit about this deal,’ he went on, ‘is that these guys are pros. I mean, they do this shit all the time. It’s what they *do*. So if you’re worried about Madge—’

Frank snorted so hard he burnt sinus.

‘Okay,’ Bryan said. ‘So what’s to stop you? You’ve paid up on all your insurance premiums, right? And it’s all there in the small print. They’re the ones put the clause in, expecting you to pay for it.’ He puffed on the Ritmeester. ‘So you’re entitled,’ Bryan continued. ‘All you need to do is get Doug to sign off for Trust Direct, extending the insurance until Friday week.’ He shrugged. ‘You don’t want to get Doug involved, you don’t want to go down the road of having Madge snatched, then fine. Just remortgage the house and nab the money from the bank instead.’

Frank gritted his teeth. ‘We did that already, Bry. So Margaret could move out and live up in Larkhill Mews, have a swimming pool out back. At the time, if memory serves, you justified it by saying maybe she’d fall in and drown.’

Bryan, remembering now, nodded. ‘So you go with Doug.’

‘Bryan,’ Frank said, as patiently as any recently reformed smoker might while trying to dissuade his lawyer from proposing a major felony, ‘we could go to prison.’

Bryan sniffed. ‘I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, Frank, but I’m professionally bound to tell you: you’re fucked. Screwed. Cornholed. The

divorce'll leave you with socks and jocks, and that malpractice suit isn't going away either. I mean, even if you had it in writing, how that poor woman explicitly asked to look like Bob Mitchum, the jury'd take one look at those eyelids and—'

Frank waved for silence, put two beer mats back to back, began shredding. 'Convince me,' he muttered.

'It's simple. Grab what you can now. Like I say, it's all there in the insurance contract anyway. What's to stop you?'

'The cops?'

'The big house or the poorhouse, Frank, who gives a fuck? I was you, I'd think long and hard about passing up half a million in cash.'

Frank boggled.

'I didn't mention,' Bryan said innocently, 'that the indemnity's for a half-mill?'

Frank swallowed hard.

'Of course,' Bryan said, tapping more ash, 'I'll be needing a finder's fee. Ten grand, say. And the boys, the pros, they charge a flat fee of fifty large. But four-forty isn't to be sneezed at. Tax-free, too.'

'Half a fucking *million*?' Frank croaked.

'To my way of thinking—and this is just me, mind—five hundred gees is a lowball shot when you're dealing with, y'know, someone's life. But I checked it out and that seems to be the standard rate. And with the contract running void this week, it'd smell if we went fucking around now looking for more than the half-mill.'

Bryan fished a scrap of paper from his breast pocket and laid it on the table, ironing its wrinkles with the heel of his hand. 'All you have to do is ring that number and ask for Terry. He'll look after the rest. You just sit back and watch the green roll in.'

Frank polished off his highball in one gulp.

'Oh,' Bryan said. 'Just one more thing. The boys'll need twenty grand up front, a good-faith gesture. You can stretch to twenty grand, right? In cash?'

Frank stared, owlish.

'Not to worry,' Bryan said. 'In cases like this, and apparently it happens more often than you'd think, the boys'll put up their own good-faith twenty. And don't sweat the vig.'

'Vig?'

'I hear what you're saying. But for twenty large they won't charge more than ten, maybe twelve points. Fifteen, tops.'

'Points?'

'Think positive, Frank. See the big picture. Half a mill.' Bryan got up. 'That's a Scotch, right?'

As Bryan headed for the bar, the spectre loomed large in Frank's imagination again: the lawyer humping Madge, his pinky finger digging into her belly button, Madge lying back on the pillows laughing and smoking a Marlboro red.

Frank gritted his teeth, tossed away the flattered remnants of the beer mats, put three more back to back.

## KAREN

'If you're out of a job,' Karen said, 'how'd you fancy you and me hooking up?'

'I don't know. You always bring a gun on these jobs?'

'Sometimes I bring a tickle-stick. It matches my eyes.'

Ray pursed his lips. 'Guns are bad juju. With armed robbery, you're just asking for trouble.'

'As opposed to, like, just kidnapping people.'

'I told you. I quit.'

'Lucky you. Some of us still have to earn a living. You want another coffee?'

'No thanks, it's crap.'

'I've got some Blue Mountain back home.' Ray just stared, not exactly

the reaction Karen'd been hoping for. 'It's Jamaican,' she said. 'Pound for pound, the most expensive beans in the world.'

'And this'd be what, like a date?'

'It'd be a lot like a cup of coffee. Maybe, you behave yourself, some conversation.'

'Conversation's good.'

'Not lately it's not. So are you coming or what?'

'Okay, yeah.'

'Want to grab some beers?'

'No, I'm good.'

'You driving?'

Ray nodded. Karen, slipping down off the high stool, said: 'Impress me. What do you drive?'

'An Audi. German import.'

'Sweet.'

'Although I should warn you, it's twelve years old.'

'Audi's Audi. Listen, I have to use the toilet. You want to wait here or in the car?'

'I like the way you think I'll wait.'

Karen grinned. 'I like the way you think you won't.'

## ROSSI

Rossi Francis Assisi Callaghan saw the light, got religion eight months short of the end of a five-year stretch for armed robbery, DUI and resisting arrest. The only break he had caught was when the judge directed that the three sentences should run concurrently, on the basis that all the offences occurred within a twenty-minute period that included Rossi's collision with a motorway median strip, which happened roughly seven seconds after Rossi fell asleep on the back of his Ducati while doing 104 kph.

But that was the only break.

'My third jolt,' Rossi said. 'No remission. So here's me, five strokes of the cane later.'

'That's rough,' said the new guy, Ferret, sprawled on the lower bunk.

'Nothing worse than justice,' Rossi said. 'Anyway, I get out in the morning.' He handed Ferret the joint.

Ferret had a toke. 'So you're saying you got religion from this Pat O'Brien guy. Who's he, the padre in here?'

'*Angels with Dirty Faces*,' Rossi said. 'Pat O'Brien plays a priest, Cagney's this gangster. Bogart's in there too. Anyway, at the end, going to the chair, Cagney pretends he's yellow, starts screaming, all this. So the kids won't think he's such a hero type.'

'And this is where you got religion.' Ferret had another toke. 'Stoned, right?'

'On, I should mention, some serious fucking grass. Mostly the shit in here wouldn't keep a nun in giggles.' Ferret took the hint; Rossi accepted the proffered joint. 'I wouldn't mind,' he said, 'but I only got the movie out thinking it was, y'know, a blue someone'd smuggled in. I mean, angels with dirty faces, you're expecting money shots, the works.' He shook his head, disgusted. 'I packed in the sex right there and then.'

'I'm thinking, in here, that wasn't as big a decision as it might have been.'

'Yeah, maybe. Anyway, what O'Brien's saying in the movie, to Cagney? That's me from now on.'

Ferret cocked his head. 'You're going to be a priest?'

'I thought about it,' Rossi admitted. 'God's truth, I thought about it.'

'Yeah?'

'Spend enough time in a cell, you'll think every fucking thought was ever fucking thought. One time I thought maybe God fucked up and was sitting in a cell somewhere, y'know, daydreaming. Us, like.'

Ferret didn't spend too long mulling that one over. 'So what's the plan now? On the out, like. You have a hook-up?'

'It's more in the way of a vocation,' Rossi said.

'Except not as a priest.'

'I've been reading up.'

'Taking courses and shit.' Ferret nodded appreciatively. 'Gets you time off, right? Early parole.'

'Fucked if I know. That's all you'll be needing, it's all in there.' Rossi reached a newspaper off the wooden table, tossed it onto Ferret's bunk. It landed with a solid thump. 'Although,' he conceded, as Ferret hefted the broadsheet dubiously, 'you'll be wanting a dictionary starting off.'

'That and two cranes. Just keep it short and tell it slow.'

Rossi beckoned for the paper, opened it wide and folded it back. 'Okay,' he said, scanning. 'First off, here's an accountant, right? Mows down this six-year-old, he's four beers over the limit. The bagman, like, not the kid. How long?'

'Two years.'

'Seven fucking months. Alright. Next up is some housing authority manager, he's on the take. Yeah? Backhanders and shit. How long?'

'Six months.'

'Suspended sentence. Here's a doctor, malpractice. We're looking at nineteen, it says here, unauthorised mastectomies. How long?'

'A medal, a pension and a gold watch.'

'Disbarment,' Rossi said, not to be denied. 'Plus they're looking into his tax affairs. You tell me, what's that to do with justice?'

'Who said it was about justice? You get caught or you don't, end of story.'

'Fair point. But this accountant, he's doing open prison, conjugal rights, all this. Jammy fucking doughnuts all fucking week. Yeah? He's out hoeing the broccoli, we're banged up in this fucking hole. Am I right?'

Ferret, sprawled on a bunk in D Wing, could hardly demur.

'Know who ends up in here, Ferret? Losers. Fuckwits knocking off bookies and chemists. And for what, a couple of grand a throw?' Rossi sucked hard on the jay. 'Know who *doesn't* end up in here? The bastards wearing ties, the ones with the offshore accounts. The kind, they're not actually stealing from people, they're just investing the cash for them.'

'Without, say, telling them first.'

'Perxactly. See, I have sixty large sitting out there right now waiting for me.'

Ferret whistled low. 'Sweet.'

'Except it's cash. Not so sweet when you're looking for a loan. I mean, I'm wearing the wrong suit, no tie. So there's forms to fill in. Questions asked. Where's the sixty large come from, whose did it used to be, what's the fucking serial number on every fucking note. All this.'

Ferret made a sympathetic clucking sound. Rossi waved it off.

'They won't stop me,' he said. 'The sixty grand'll cover me for the first year. And once I'm up and running, I'll be applying for all sorts.'

'Cover you for what?'

'Overheads. Rent and shit on the office.'

'You're going into business?'

Rossi nodded solemnly. 'An advice centre. The Francis Assisi Rehabilitation Concern. For ex-cons, like. Although, with the name, I might need permission from the pope first.'

Ferret squinted. 'Advising cons on what? Where's best to fence their shit, that kind of thing?'

'See,' Rossi said, stabbing the air with the jay for emphasis, 'there's the problem right there. Everyone expects when a man gets out that it's only a matter of time before he goes back in. Am I right?'

'Most of us do.'

'Okay. But say you're a booze hound, right? Hitting it hard. What do you do?'

'Al-Anon.'

'You're a junkie, where do you go?'

'Methadone programme.'

'But if you're an ex-con wanting to break the cycle, who can you talk to?'

Ferret scratched an ear.

'The Francis Assisi Rehabilitation Concern,' Rossi said. He bounced a thumb off his chest. 'Me.'

Ferret thought that one over. 'You'd be like a counsellor? Some shit like that?'

'Perfuckinglyxactly.'

'And you've trained for this? Done courses and shit?'

'Believe it. At the university of hard fucking knocks.'

'So you're not actually, y'know, qualified.'

'I've done the crime, Ferret, *and* I've done the time. Three fucking jolts' worth. So you tell me, am I qualified to tell cons what's what? Or would you rather talk to some pony tart in a white coat waving a clipboard with a face on her like a robber's dog?'

'I hear you,' Ferret said. 'I'm only saying, if you don't have the certificate framed on the wall ...'

'See, this is the beauty of it,' Rossi said. 'Know what kind of qualifications you need to start a charity?'

'A charity?'

'Fuck yeah, a charity. You kidding? Charities get all the tax breaks going. Then, every time you pick up a paper there's some charity in there getting press. Or they're on TV. And all for free, like. It's cancer this, AIDS that, fucking Africa the other. Then there's your basic fund-raising activities. You see what I'm saying.'

Ferret lay back on the bunk, head pillowed on his arms. 'Sounds to me,' he said slowly, 'it could be the basic blueprint for a con's co-op. What d'you think, would a union be a step too far?'

'I don't know,' Rossi admitted. 'I mean, if you want to fleece the system all the way down to the bone, politics is the only way to go.'

After a while, without opening his eyes, Ferret said: 'My brother-in-law's brother, he's into me for two grand in snow.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I could give you his address, get you to call around. Then you cut me in on the ground floor for two large.'

'I'll do you five points.'

'That's more than generous, Rossi.'

"A helping hand," Rossi recited loftily, "not a boot in the balls."

'The Francis Assisi Rehabilitation Concern, right?'

'FARC for short.'

'I like it. Neat and tidy.'

Rossi nodded, pleased. Then a frown clouded his face. 'All I'm hoping,' he said, 'is the pope doesn't fuck me around on the name. What d'you think, will he want points?'

## KAREN

Karen had a crooked jaw from the time she repeatedly smashed her chin on the rim of the bathroom's porcelain sink, her father downstairs on the kitchen floor, flat on his back with a fork lodged just above his heart.

The jaw gave her mouth an ironic twist, pushing out the lower lip, so people who didn't know Karen thought she was all the time sneering, or laughing at some private joke. The upside with that was, when Karen took a stool at a bar she generally managed to get quietly drunk without too many interruptions. The worst she had to deal with was some skinny-assed pimple-factory telling her cleavage to cheer up, it might never happen. To which Karen'd reply: 'I carry a knife.'

What she liked about Ray was he didn't crowd her. Sitting near enough so she caught a whiff of minty breath but not so close she needed to back off to breathe. He held himself well, careless but angular, and he was tall enough to carry it off. Wearing a pale blue rumpled shirt, navy denims that looked new. Had all his hair too, even if it was brushed up in a dopey quiff.

Then there was the way he talked to her eyes. Okay, it was a pose: the only complaint men had about Karen's cleavage was the lack of a mirror wedged in there too. But what Karen liked about that was his self-control, the way he kept his eyes on hers.

She touched up her lip-gloss, giving herself the once-over in the

bathroom mirror. Then smiled, remembering Ray's line, how he was a tough-guy kidnapper. At least it was original. Karen had heard all the lines so often she was starting to feel like her own understudy. If Karen stuck around until the end of the night, any night, some guy was bound to take an interest.

Lately though, Karen hadn't been sticking around too long. Once in a while, maybe, when she felt the need. But even that wasn't happening so much anymore. Karen'd said to Madge, only the Friday just gone: *Like, when even the skinny-assed pimply guys are married, you get to thinking, how much do I really need that need?*

What mattered about all this was, by the time she met Ray, Karen hadn't been laid in over six months. How much over Karen didn't know, and she didn't want to know. Once it went more than six months, Karen stopped counting.

Plus, she was still buzzing from pulling the job. From experience, Karen knew she wouldn't be getting much sleep that night anyway.

## **RAY**

Ray lit a cigarette and cranked the window, humming along with the stereo. Wondering how it was Bruce always got himself hooked up on these women called Mary. 'Thunder Road', 'The River', 'Mary's Place' ... Christ, the man was obsessed.

Ray, if he was Springsteen, he'd have shot through for Mexico long ago, nabbed himself a Juanita, some shit like that. Ray'd only ever met one Karen before, this Kiwi blonde in Hamburg with an oral fixation. Ray getting blowjobs on buses, trains, even one time in the linen closet of a motel on the outskirts of Saarbrücken, near the French border. Ray on his back in a pile of dirty sheets coming up with a whole new language all his own.

Ray figured her reaction to the Transit van, Karen expecting an Audi, would tell him as much as he needed to know for the time being.

Then he was waiting so long he started wondering what the hold-up was, if maybe she wasn't running some kind of gag, keep the dumb guy hanging around the car park all night. He checked the clock, decided to give her another five minutes, and then the coffee hit. By the time Karen finally appeared, backlit in the bar's doorway, Ray was seriously considering a sneaky pee around the back of the Transit.

She caught his headlight flash, strolled across, climbed up into the cab.

'So what happened?' she said, looking around. 'The clock strike twelve or something?'

'Maybe you shouldn't believe everything strange men tell you in bars.'

'Don't flatter yourself. You're not that strange.'

'That might well be the tragedy of my life.'

'Next you'll be telling me you're not this hotshot kidnap artist.'

Ray, sheepish, jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Karen glanced into the back of the van, where the floor was littered with empty paint pots, roller-brushes, multicoloured splash-sheets. 'You're a decorator?' she said.

'I paint murals.'

'Murals?'

'Wall art. In kids' bedrooms. Y'know, Winnie the Pooh, the Lion King, Lord of the Rings. That kind of thing.'

'Which is why you're a baby-sitter.'

'Sure, yeah. Listen, you live far from here?'

'Near enough. Why?'

'That coffee's run right through me. Mind if I scoot back inside?'

'Prostate trouble?'

'Harsh,' Ray said, opening the door. 'Unnecessarily harsh.'

## **KAREN**

He was more articulate than she was used to meeting, Karen thought, watching Ray stiff-leg it across the car park. Not that he used big words,



complicating things. More that he spoke clearly, sounding cautious, alert to the consequences of what he was saying. In Karen's experience most people said the first thing they thought of and stuck with that. Or, like Rossi, they were foul-mouthed mumblerers, so everything sounded the same.

Karen, it was instinctive by now, compared everyone with Rossi. Favourably, as it happened.

She shook a cigarette from the deck on the dashboard and ran through her checklist. She hadn't been expecting any hook-ups, not on a Wednesday night, and definitely not on any night she was pulling a job. But the bra and pants were okay, nothing fancy but nothing too granny either, and she'd shaved her legs and pits after a long, luxurious bath the day before. The towels were probably still on the bathroom floor.

She tried to remember what kind of mess she'd left the apartment in, if she'd made the bed. Karen wasn't exactly house-proud to start with, and dusting wasn't all that high on her list of priorities when she had a job coming on.

Then again, Ray didn't seem the kind to object to a little clutter. The rear of the Transit was a mess and the cab was strewn with sweet-wrappers, empty cigarette boxes, used parking stubs. Karen, curious, reached down and slid the neat pile of large white cards out from under the driver's seat. She turned them around, exhaling at the windscreen, then frowned.

The first card read, in blue crayon: *You have no reason to be afraid.*

Karen flicked through the rest, eight in total, glancing across at the door of the bar. Then she shoved the cards back beneath the driver's seat. Breathing fast and shallow.

This would be a good time, she acknowledged, to just walk away. Hail a cab, get herself home, forget all about Ray.

But Karen had never met a tough-guy kidnapper before. And she had prickles at the nape of her neck, tingles trickling up the back of her thighs.

Plus, if things got out of hand, it was in her bag: Karen was still packing the .44.

## DOYLE

'Hey-up,' Sparks said. 'He's back.'

Doyle brushed her hair off her shoulder, glancing around at the tall guy with the quiff crossing the bar towards the toilets. Definitely not bad, she thought. Doyle liked them tall. And no ring. Doyle, she couldn't help herself—she liked them better when they weren't married.

'You going to, y'know, *do* anything?' Sparks said.

'Like what?'

'Ask him for a birthday kiss.' Sparks snorted a drunken giggle. 'Thirty-four of 'em.'

'And then, you're the only one came out for my party drinks, we just send you home. Is that it?'

'You wouldn't share?'

'I know where you've been, Sparks.'

'Me-fucking-ow. Hold on, here he comes again.'

But he didn't even look in their direction. Just crossed the bar, pushed out through the door.

'Guess he scored with the tart in the leathers,' Sparks observed gloomily.

'With an ass like that in leathers? You're surprised?'

'Fucking bitch.' Sparks brightened up. 'Anyway, he didn't take half long enough in the toilet. A real man, he'd need about five minutes just to unfold his dick to take a piss. Maybe you're just saving yourself another disappointing night.'

'Want to know,' Doyle said with feeling, 'what's disappointing? If we come in here together one more time, we're officially a couple.'

Sparks winked and blew a sloppy kiss. Doyle went to the bar.

## RAY

Ray knew from experience to keep his mouth shut once a woman has made up her mind. Ray, thinking he was negotiating his way between the

sheets, had talked himself out the front door more than once.

So the plan, as he climbed into the Transit, was to let Karen do most of the talking. This until they turned out of the car park and Karen said: 'Tell me more about how you quit baby-sitting.'

'I was kidding. I told you, I paint murals.'

'You have no reason to be afraid,' Karen recited. 'You are in no danger. I mean you no harm. You will be well treated.' She paused. 'Want me to go on?'

Ray looked across. Karen raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'What do you want to know?' Ray said.

'Why you quit.'

'I told you. A new guy got involved, I didn't like him. So I quit.'

'Try me on details. I like details.'

'Details get people fucked, Karen. And when the people I know get fucked, everyone gets fucked. I'm making this clear, right?'

'To me.'

'To you, yeah. Who else?'

'I mean, you're saying it to me. Who you interrupted in the middle of a stick-up.'

Ray considered that. 'How much detail?' he said.

'You get going,' Karen lit two cigarettes, handed one across. 'If I think you're leaving anything out, I'll say.'

Ray shrugged as he exhaled. 'This new shylock,' he said slowly, 'I just didn't like his style. Take today, I'm on my way home from work. So when the guy asks if I'm carrying I think he means drugs. Except the guy's asking about mobile phones. Has this thing where he doesn't want anyone around him with a phone turned on in case anyone takes a call that could incriminate him. I'm thinking, okay by me, the guy's a thinker. So I turn off my phone, I tell him, "That's genius, man." And he goes, "Only the cautious survive." I mean,' Ray said, glancing across at Karen, 'he's saying this with a straight face.'

'The shylock,' Karen said. 'He's a guy who loans money, right?'

Ray nodded. 'He's new in for the Fridge. To bankroll Terry's ops.'

'What kind of ops?'

'Say Terry wants to blag a payroll run. He'll need hardware, transport, manpower. Maybe he needs to drop a wedge for an inside touch. All that takes money, and any decent businessman wants to spread his risk around. So the shylock fronts up and Terry cuts him in for points.'

'Points being a percentage.'

'Right. Twenty percent of the take, that's twenty points. Usually off the gross.'

'Okay.'

'But this guy's fucking me around. See, I work off a flat twenty for any job up to two hundred grand. After that it's twelve points on the gross. The higher the gross, the more risk I'm taking.'

'Makes sense.'

'Except the shylock, being new, he's saying, "How come it's a flat twenty?" I say, "Terry knows all this already. It's set, it's been set since the start. You didn't ask Terry?" And the shylock says, "I'm asking you."'

'So you'll know,' Karen said, 'who's in charge.'

'I'm sitting there, I don't answer straight away. The last guy, the Fridge, I liked him. Y'know? A serious guy. Could be philosophical. This is a guy who's known and respected for being cautious. Gets called in to resolve disputes. This is why the cops only ever raided him for show. He's what they call a calming influence.'

'What happened to him?'

'What I'm hearing is it's some Balkan crew, new in town and looking to shake things up, bunker in. I'm guessing the shylock's fronting for them, that he's fingered the Fridge for points on the Fridge's book. This is why I'm around at Terry Swipes' place earlier on.'

'Terry Swipes?'

Ray nodded. 'I'm looking for the inside line from Terry. See if he doesn't want to dissolve our arrangement now the Fridge is gone. But the

shylock's already there in the office when I arrive. Sitting on the corner of Terry's desk.'

'So Terry knows who's boss too.'

'Absolutely.'

'What's he look like?'

Ray shrugged. 'Blocky, hard. Shaved head. He's wearing this suit, baggy in the crotch and too long in the cuffs. The kind that always need a good ironing but still look like they'd stand up by themselves propped against a wall. Y'know?'

Karen nodded.

'Anyway, this guy's keen to give the impression he's ruthless, brutal. Looks to me like he's suffering from squinty-eye syndrome, but you don't want to jump to conclusions. The Slavs are hardcore. Sociopaths. Incapable of grasping the concept of something for everyone.'

'Not the kind you just walk away from.'

'This is the point,' Ray said. 'I don't know if I can afford *not* to walk away. With the Fridge gone and a Balkan crew moving in, it's only a matter of time before the cops come down heavy on everyone.' He glanced across. 'You might want to think about that.'

'Some of us don't have a choice, Ray. Go on—the guy's giving you grief about twelve points.'

'I'm playing it straight,' he said. 'No edge. All I say is, "I charge a flat twenty on anything up to two hundred." The shylock thinks this is hilarious. "And after two hundred," he says, "what then?" "Then it goes to twelve points," I tell him. "Really?" he says. "A whole twelve?"'

'Taking the piss,' Karen said.

'I can see it from his perspective,' Ray conceded. 'He's looking at some guy in overalls covered in paint splatters. I mean, who the fuck am I to him? But then he starts getting personal.'

'Oh yeah?'

"You're talking to me about points?" he says. Laughing it up, trying to get Terry in on the joke. Terry sitting there staring at me, y'know,

wanting me to play along. Except the shylock goes, "You should be talking to your barber, man. With that fucking fringe? The King is dead, get out the fucking shears."

'He's disrespecting the quiff?'

'I couldn't believe it. The guy thinking I'd want to duke it out over a haircut. I just went, "That's twelve on the gross, by the way." Terry nearly shit.'

'What'd he say to that?'

"You're on a giraffe."

'A giraffe?'

'Having a laugh. I say no. He says, "Say we tell you it's two hundred. How do you find out it's more?" "Maybe I don't," I say. "But what if you do?" he says. "Don't worry about it," I say, "I probably won't find out." "Anyone ever gipped you before?" he says. By now I've had enough. I tell him he should be in the movies and get up, head for the door. The shylock's going, "Where the fuck do you think you're off to?" I tell him, if he wants someone snatched, I'll keep them out of sight until he gets his hook-up. That to me is worth twelve on the gross. But if he doesn't go that high, no harm done.'

'What'd he say to that?'

'Nothing. I jumped across it, asked Terry, "Hey, Terry—where'd you get those blinds?"'

'Blinds?' Karen said.

'Sure. These double-rolled bamboo on the window behind the desk.'

'Window blinds?'

'This is what the shylock is saying. By the time he gets his head around the switch, I'm gone.'

## KAREN

'Okay,' Karen said. 'But window blinds?'

'See, it starts out with murals. Then, you're halfway through, they

start wondering about backdrops. Contrasts on the covings, the skirting boards, that kind of thing. Before you know it, they're talking about window blinds.'

'Take the next left,' Karen said. Ray indicated, turned off.

'Go on,' she said.

'I swear, there's someone out there who spends their whole life coming up with new blinds. Soon as you get a handle on one, another'll pop up. Some sort of pleated Venetian or sheer horizontal. Double-rolled bamboo. Won't be long,' he warned, 'before you'll need a degree in origami just to let the sun in.'

'Take the second left off the next roundabout.'

'I wouldn't have put Terry Swipes down for dabbling in the black arts. But there it was behind his desk, a chunky lateral bamboo, except it's rolled vertically to one side of the window. I'm wondering, is it something new for autumn or is it a retro thing. Y'know?'

Ray came off the roundabout and pulled in when Karen pointed to wrought-iron gates set into a dry-stone arch. Beyond the gates, under orange lights, was a half-empty car park, a neatly manicured lawn, four squat three-storey apartment blocks.

'That's me,' she said, unclipping her safety belt and opening her door. Then she realised Ray wasn't moving. 'You're not coming in?'

'You want me to?'

'That was the idea. So you could taste some decent coffee.'

'Even after all the, y'know.'

'You're not so tough. Besides, who'd want to snatch me?'

'That's not the point.'

'If it'll make you happier,' Karen said, digging out her mobile, hitting a button. While she waited she stared boldly at Ray. Then, when the answering machine kicked in: 'Madge? Hi. It's about one-ish, I've pulled, and the guy's worried that I'm not worried about making him coffee. So—he's called Ray and he drives a white Transit van, registration number nine-six-dee-one-nine-nine-five-three. Buzz me tomorrow.'

She hung up. 'Happy now?'

Ray turned off the engine.

On the way up the apartment-block steps, he said: 'So this coffee is the best, right?'

'Now you're a connoisseur?'

'Just fussy. And all the time, not just with coffee.'

'I'm supposed to be flattered now, right?'

'Only if my opinion counts for anything. Why, would that be a problem for you?'

Karen, buzzing on three vodka-tonics, one of them a double, had to think that one through while she put the key in the lock. 'Not right now,' she said. 'Tomorrow, though, yeah. Probably.'

Ray shrugged. 'So let's just drink some coffee.'

## MADGE

When Karen rang, Madge had other things on her mind. For the past hour or so, ever since a passionate Doug had moaned 'Honey-mums' just before he shot his wad onto her hip—he'd been aiming for her breasts, but Madge, for one, wasn't disappointed his ambition exceeded his ability—Madge had been awed by the number of names she answered to. So she let the phone ring out and click through to the answering service.

*Madge? Hi. It's about one-ish, I've pulled, and the guy's worried that I'm not worried ...*

Madge, she thought. Was that even a name? It sounded, if you said it a certain way, like some kind of stain, strawberry jam squished into the carpet. She took a pull on the loose joint she'd managed to roll, sluiced down another gulp of iced brandy-ginger, and tuned back into the message.

*... nine-six-dee-one-nine-nine-five-three. Buzz me tomorrow.*

The phone clicked dead.

'Who was that?' Doug wanted to know.

Madge looked down, surprised. She'd forgotten Doug was still there, sprawled across her pillows, sweat glistening through his comb-over. 'Just someone I know,' she said.

'Sounds like she's about to get lucky.'

Madge thought about that. 'She could get pregnant tonight,' she said. 'Or pick up a dose she can't put down. Or the guy could be a fruitcake, turning nasty once she lets him in.'

'Possible, I suppose,' Doug said, scratching one-fingered at the inside of his thigh.

'Or say he doesn't. Say he's just hopeless in bed, can't kiss, getting sloppy, slimy. Then, tomorrow morning, she can't get rid of him. He's like a dog, sticking around with his tongue hanging out.'

'When you put it like that ...'

'Or he could be married. Like you.'

'I take your point. Do you want me to go?'

'Doug,' Madge said, admiring her new belly-button ring, 'I didn't want you here in the first place. Remember? The bit before you started crying on my doorstep?'

Doug sounded a lot like damp wallpaper as he peeled away from the sheet. He really did sweat a lot, Madge observed, noticing how Doug's hairy back stained through his shirt. She wondered if all men sweated as much. Frank had been a pumper too.

'Will I see you this weekend?' he said, hauling on his jockey shorts.

Madge took another hit off the joint. 'I wouldn't have thought so.'

'What about—'

'I'll be busy.'

'But you don't even know when—'

'I'm going away, Doug. To work in the slums of Calcutta. I'll send you a postcard.'

'Not to the house,' he said, alarmed. 'Christ, Audra'd be asking all sorts.'

'To the office, then.'

Doug nodded, struggling with his left sock. Madge didn't have the

heart to tell him that Audra was too busy fucking half of Oakwood to notice a blue whale coming through her letterbox, let alone any Calcutta postcards. Not that Madge was passing judgment. At least Audra had standards, refused to screw anyone who played off more than a twelve handicap. Madge, on the other hand, was fucking one of the few men Audra wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole, even if her allowance depended on it.

'Doug?'

'What?'

'When you see Frank, at the golf? Tell him I need that five grand fast.'

Doug stared, aghast. 'You think that's wise?'

'If I was any way wise, Doug, I wouldn't be humping you.'

Madge waited until she heard the front door slam, then got the joint lit and went back to wondering about all her names. Her parents had been generous, christening her Margaret Dolores Assumpta Bernadette—Margaret after her maternal grandmother, Dolores for some reason Madge never discovered, Assumpta because her father had pushed the boat out when he heard christening names came free, and Bernadette because her mother said you had to have at least one properly martyred saint.

Somewhere along the line Margaret had been shortened to Mags, although once she hit puberty it had lengthened again, to Madge. By then Madge had taken Frances for her confirmation name. Later on, when she got married, Madge had accrued yet another title: Margaret Dolan. This along with all sorts of dopey cute names from Frank, most of them baby-talk slush he thought was sexy. And soon after that, Madge had had to get used to being called Moms.

She'd always believed Jeanie and Liz used the plural because they were twins, but whatever the reason, Moms was the name that irritated Madge the most. Although she had to admit, even Moms wasn't as bad as the names her father had used when speaking to her—bellowing, actually—for what proved to be the last time. Slut, whore, tart and round-heels were only some of the variations on what had quickly

become, for Madge if not her father, a boringly repetitive theme.

Now, she thought, sucking on the loose joint and brushing the hot-spots off the quilt, she was going to have to get used to yet another title. As a divorcée Madge would be expected to revert back to her maiden name. The thing about that was, Madge wasn't sure she would respond to anyone who called her by that name. It was so long since she'd used it that Madge felt the name belonged to someone she had sat beside in school but hadn't seen, or wanted to see, in half a lifetime.

Which was why, at the age of fifty-one, sitting up in bed with the quilt tucked around her thighs, halfway through the first joint she'd ever rolled, her hip still sticky, Madge heard herself whisper: 'Okay. But who the fuck am I, really?'

## KAREN

Karen went straight through to the kitchen, waving Ray into the living room. 'The stereo's in the corner,' she called.

But when she came back with the tray, having changed out of the leathers into denims and a top with just enough V-neck to make it worth his while sneaking a peek, he was still leaning over the side of the couch looking at the CD rack. 'What do you want to hear?' he said, without looking up.

Karen sat on the couch too, at a discreet but not insurmountable distance, and placed the tray on the low table. 'I don't mind. Whatever.'

'It's your place.'

'You're the guest.'

He held up a CD. 'How about these guys, The Smiths?'

'Works for me.'

He fiddled with the stereo while she plunged the coffee, Ray sniffing the air with a cheeky glee. Karen nodded along with the intro, 'Bigmouth Strikes Again'. Then it hit her.

'I get it now,' she said. 'With the fringe? You remind me of Morrissey.'

'I get that a lot.'

'Liar.'

'I get that a lot too.'

'And you're not half as good-looking as you think you are.'

'That's still pretty good-looking.'

'Says you.'

'Says my agent.'

'You have an agent now?'

'I have an agent in every time-zone. It's the only way to keep up.'

She liked the sound of his voice, a mellow timbre that made Karen want to tuck it up under her chin, roll over on her side. Although the quiff, she decided, would have to go.

'You okay?' he said.

'Sure, yeah. Fine.' She toasted him with the coffee mug. He smiled and toasted her back.

And then Karen heard herself tell the fork story, up to and including the conversation with the female warder.

Karen couldn't believe it. Okay, she was drunk, and Ray looked entirely passable—she could understand how people might tell Ray things they shouldn't just to see his eyes glow like that, turn tigery. But Karen usually waited until after she got her jollies to tell the fork story, this to get rid of the guy. And if that didn't work, Karen'd introduce him to Anna.

Right around then was when they'd start having trouble with their mobile phones.

'The day my mother died,' she said, 'was the day I realised you can beat someone to death without doing it all in one go.'

Ray winced.

'This is when,' she said, 'I've just turned fourteen. At the time I wasn't sure who I hated most. Him for dishing it out or her for—'

'Hey, Karen?'

She waved him off. 'That only lasted until he started in on me. He racked up one snapped tibia, three concussions, two broken ribs and a perforated eardrum. This in about four years. Anyway, the last time, one of the concussions, I come to in the kitchen. He's spark out on the floor, but he's breathing. There's a fork stuck in him, here, just above the heart,' she said, patting the fleshy part of her shoulder.

'The fork was you?'

She nodded. 'After, they said it only caused superficial damage. The stroke he got from the shock of being attacked back.'

'Karen, you don't have to tell—'

'Bear with me. Okay—I leave him there, go to the bathroom. There's a bruise swelling up over this eye but that's not enough, not nearly. So I spend about twenty minutes bouncing this,' pointing to her crooked jaw, 'off the round corners of the sink. Y'know, the porcelain ones?'

Ray swallowed dry.

'Anyway, I collect the teeth, clean up, go downstairs and ring the cops. He gets four years, eighteen months suspended. I gave it two weeks and went to visit. I wait until everyone's into their conversations, it's all whispers. This is when I start screaming about how he's been fucking me up the ass since I was eight years old. So they hustle me out and call in this warder from the female block, put me in a quiet office, bring us tea. I told the warder it was all lies, he never touched me that way. But I told her he'd killed my mother, taking fourteen years to do it. She says, "So this kiddie-rape stuff—you want me to spread it around?"'

Ray nodding along. After a while he said: 'Forked anyone since?'

'Nope.'

'Ever wanted to?'

'Yep.'

'But you didn't.'

'Nope.'

He sipped his coffee. 'Okay by me.'

But in the bathroom, brushing her teeth, she caught herself staring at

her misaligned jaw, the twist in the corner of her mouth, the faint discoloration of the false plate behind her lower lip. She spat and rinsed, leaned in over the sink close to the mirror, thinking, *He can't see what you see.*

He was sitting on the near side of the bed when she got in from the bathroom. As she turned sideways, edging between the wicker laundry hamper and the bottom of the bed, she said: 'There's condoms in the top drawer.'

'Uh, no thanks. That's fine.'

From his tone Karen understood he wasn't turning down the condom, thanks all the same. Which Karen had been expecting, Karen a lucky girl, always meeting these guys who'd had vasectomies.

No, Ray was turning down a jump. Turning Karen down, and in her own bedroom too. She stood on the other side of the bed staring at the back of his head, feeling foolish. Then, because it was her bedroom, she got mad. Like, what had he been expecting, a Tupperware party?

He twisted around to look up at her across his shoulder. 'If it's okay with you, I'd like to see how we fit together in the morning first.'

'Yeah, okay. If that's alright with you.'

All of which was so much bullshit. Karen didn't have a stopwatch handy, but she guessed he went about six minutes that night.

Which wasn't bad going, because halfway through Karen decided there'd be a second night. Even though she'd also decided the fit-together routine was probably Ray's best line.