

CHAPTER 1

The echo of the ringing phone ran through him like the electricity. Ciaran crept onto the landing, body pressed against the wall, so he couldn't be seen from below.

"Come on," he muttered.

He jumped as the phone rang again: one ring, two rings, stop. His mother, Sinead, cursed as she halted her second dash for the phone and stomped back to the kitchen.

Ciaran tiptoed downstairs and lifted the handset. He could see his mum at the end of the corridor washing the breakfast dishes. Flurries of snow danced beyond the kitchen window. He turned his back on her and keyed through the phone's call menu. Two missed calls with the same number. It was the prison. This was Patrick's code for when he needed to speak to him; two rings, cut off, two rings, cut off.

He almost fumbled the phone when it rang again.

"Got it," he said, pressing the receiver to his ear.

"This is a call from Her Majesty's Brixton Prison, will you accept the call?" said a voice.

"Yes."

The line clicked. Somebody was breathing into the receiver. Behind this, voices were raised and metal slammed against metal.

"Who is it?" His mum stood in the doorway, soap suds dripping from her fingers. She wiped them on a tea towel.

"G."

"G? Who's G?"

"That's his name."

"Any other letters?"

"Who're you, the cops?"

"I'm your mother, for my sins. And today your mother's not in the mood for any of your lip. Who's G?" she said, her Irish accent more distinct as always when she was angry.

Ciaran sighed. He could hear Patrick's breath as he waited on the other end of the line.

"George. The street dancer. Sideways hats, baggy pants, self-taught suicide flips. I showed you one of his clips on YouTube."

"Don't lie to me Ciaran."

"I'm not."

She stared at him. They stared at him; his mum from the kitchen doorway, his dad from the picture on the wall. His dark face, proud and handsome, smiling from beneath the peak of a marine's cap. A medal, awarded for gallantry, gleaming on his chest.

Sinead was looking at the picture too. "Your dad hated lying."

"I hated him dying."

Sinead blinked, searching for words.

"Hurry up, soldier, clock's ticking," said Patrick, his voice taut and anxious. "Get her out of there."

Ciaran looked at his dad's photo then back at his mum. Took a deep breath.

"It's George, okay. Go on, talk to him." Ciaran held out the phone. "If you don't trust me."

She took a step forward, reaching for the phone, looking into his eyes. Tinny sounds escaped the receiver. They stared at each other. Finally, she shook her head and dropped her hand.

"You're going to be the death of me," she said, returning to the kitchen and slamming a bowl into the soapy water. Suds leapt into the air and splattered onto the floor. She cursed but didn't move to clean them up. Her shoulders started to rise and fall, as if she was silently laughing, but Ciaran knew she wasn't. He opened his mouth to say something, maybe apologise, but Patrick was in his ear.

"She gone?"

"Yes," said Ciaran, pressing the handset to his ear and lowering his voice.

"Liking your work, soldier."

Behind Patrick's words, voices were raised in argument and high spirits. Somebody cackled, then coughed and spat. Metal doors clanged shut the sound echoing. Keys rattled in locks. Pool balls click-clacked. Laughter. A scream. Heavy weights thudded onto workout mats.

"Come with her today."

Ciaran glanced over his shoulder. His mum was out of sight. He could hear crockery rattling as she stacked bowls and mugs into a cupboard.

"What?"

"Come visit me today."

"She won't let me."

Patrick's phlegmy laugh sounded like a lung full of bolts. "Not an option. Find a way."

"You know how she is ..."

"Are you going to let me down, soldier?"

He felt the words like a slap.

"No, but ..."

"No buts, you're fourteen, a man. You're one of my soldiers, aren't you."

"Yeah."

"Good, because today I'm calling you up for active duty. This is life or death for me."

Another voice joined the conversation. A northern accent. "I thought you said he'd do whatever you said, Paddy?"

"He will, chill, I'm sorting it," said Patrick, his voice quieting as he faced away from the phone.

"Moron," he muttered as he returned his attention to Ciaran. "Remember dad's secret notes. The joke he used to play on mum?"

"Notes?" Ciaran's mind was spinning. How was he going to force her into taking him to the prison.

"Jesus H, turn on your brain. I'm up the creek and you're my paddle; the notes, palm to palm, say one thing with words another with the notes."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Good, that's how I'll give you your orders and ..."

Patrick yelled. Trainers squeaked against linoleum. Then all Ciaran could hear was the phone, twisting on its cord, banging against the wall: thud ... thud ... thud.

"Patrick? Patrick?"

His whispers went unanswered until the northern voice spoke. "Be here today if you ever want to see your scumbag brother alive again. Say anything, to anybody else, and he's dead."

The words ended and the dialling tone filled his head. Hand shaking, Ciaran replaced the phone in its cradle. When he turned around, his mum was standing in the doorway, arms crossed, her eyes dark with anger.

"How's G? Did he decide to change his name to Patrick halfway through the conversation?"

"Mum ..."

"Save it, you're not coming."

"But ..."

She turned away, leaving Ciaran standing in the hallway beneath his dad's never changing smile.

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Sinead made ready to leave soon afterwards. He'd threatened disobedience and then pleaded for understanding, but she'd repulsed both tactics with silence.

Finally, pulling on her coat, she turned to him. "Be honest with me, for once, why today?"

Be here, if you ever want to see your scumbag brother alive again. Say anything to anybody else and he's dead.

"Just because," said Ciaran.

She slammed the door as she left.

The memory of Patrick's yells and grunts rattled through his bones. They'd yanked him away from the phone, probably kicked him as he lay on the floor.

This is life or death.

He pulled on a hoodie and his jacket. Grabbed his house keys and ran down the street. At the corner, four kids wearing puff jackets over school uniforms sat astride BMX bikes their laughter dying as Ciaran approached. They were older than him, fifteen, some sixteen, but he was taller than all of them.

"Give me your bike, Fish." Ciaran grabbed handlebars.

"Leave it out." Snowflakes settled on the kid's Afro as he unsuccessfully tried to yank the bike free of Ciaran's grip.

"I need it. Business," said Ciaran.

"What's happened to you, bruv? Why don't you hang around with us no more?"

"Why should I?"

"We're mates? Remember?"

"I don't need mates anymore. Give me the bike."

"You're having a laugh."

"Remember who my brother is?"

"Patrick."

"I'm doing a job for him."

"But he's inside," said a kid who's small features and freckles clustered around his roman nose like filings around a magnet.

"You think everything stops because of that? I can tell his crew you didn't help?"

Fish swung his leg over the crossbar. He glared at the other kid, raising an eyebrow. "Didn't say that, did you Nozzle?"

Ciaran jumped on the bike and pedalled. His mum was already climbing aboard a bus. One of the kids shouted after him, but the wind ripped up his words. Gusts whipped the strengthening storm into Ciaran's face, numbing his cheeks. Snowflakes stung his eyes. He cut across the park, already lying under a slim white blanket, and jumped the bike into a snake of snarling traffic behind the bus. Cars were bumper to bumper. Edging forward, engines growling, wipers dumping blades of slush at the edge of windscreens.

Fifty minutes of lung-busting pedalling later, his face dead with cold and his trainers soaking wet, he skidded to a halt outside the prison as the bus pulled to a halt.

His mum stepped onto the pavement. She cursed and brushed past him.

"You can't stop me." He dumped the bike and followed her.

"Oh yes I can."

"Patrick's in trouble."

She kept walking. "He's always in trouble, that's why he's in prison. He is trouble."

"It's not his fault."

Sinead spun to face him. "He put a man in a coma and then the man died. You do understand that, don't you Ciaran?"

"He didn't do it."

"Oh, of course not! It's never Patrick is it?"

"The others set him up."

"No, they didn't. Your brother did it."

"If he's so bad, why do you still visit him?"

Sinead sighed, started to walk away, then turned back to face him.

"Because he's my son and I love him despite everything he's done. I can't help it. It's the cross I have to carry as his mother. But I love you too and I don't want you to turn out like him. It'd break what's left of my heart. And wherever your dad's looking down on us from, it'd break his heart too."

"He doesn't get a vote" said Ciaran. "He's not here."

"Ciaran ..."

"No, I'm not talking about that. Okay. Patrick's here and he needs me. If you love me, you'll let me see him, because if I lose him as well it'll be your fault."

"Now that's ..."

"Your fault."

Her eyes filled with tears and she turned away. "Jesus, have it your way."

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