

PRAISE FOR *THE GHOSTS OF BELFAST*

“Not only one of the finest thriller debuts of the last ten years, but also one of the best Irish novels, in any genre, of recent times.”—JOHN CONNOLLY, author of *The Whisperers*

“*The Ghosts of Belfast* is the book when the world finally sits up and goes WOW, the Irish really have taken over the world of crime writing, Stuart Neville is Ireland’s answer to Henning Mankell.” —KEN BRUEN, author of *The Devil*

“[A] crime novel that counts among the best brought out this calendar year. . . . *The Ghosts of Belfast* would have been a superior effort had it been just about Fegan’s struggle to assert his inner goodness in the face of larger evil, but its narrative power draws further strength from Neville’s acute understanding of Northern Ireland’s true state, and how, in just a few short years, ‘the North had become the poor relation, the bastard child no one had the heart to send away.’” —*Los Angeles Times*

“*The Ghosts of Belfast*, a bleak, despairing first novel by Stuart Neville, is the most authentic piece of Irish noir fiction since Ken Bruen’s thriller, *The Guards*.”—MARILYN STASIO, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Stuart Neville belongs to a younger generation of writers for whom the region’s darkest years are history—but that history endures, as his first novel, *The Ghosts of Belfast*, shockingly demonstrates. . . . This noir thriller plays out in a Belfast that, even in summer sunshine, remains oppressively gray. The clannishness of its inhabitants is vividly evoked in Neville’s descriptions of a tiny rowhouse packed with mourners for a murdered man’s wake or a seedy pub where the bartender has learned to look the other way when violence arrives. A riot scene, one of the novel’s best, captures a new generation’s appetite for blood and an old veteran’s nostalgia. . . . In scene after gruesome scene, Neville attempts to persuade us that this time around, with this repentant murderer, the killing is different.” —*Washington Post*

“In his stunning debut, Stuart Neville delivers an inspired, gritty view of how violence’s aftermath lasts for years and the toll it takes on each person involved. *The Ghosts of Belfast* also insightfully delves into Irish politics, the uneasy truce in Northern Ireland, redemption, guilt and responsibility. . . . Neville delivers an emotionally packed novel that is both empathetic and savage. Neville never makes Gerry’s visions of ghosts seem trite or silly. Like his countryman, John Connolly, Neville keeps the supernatural aspects believable. . . . *The Ghosts of Belfast* is a haunting debut.” —OLINE COGDILL, *South Florida Sun Sentinel*

“*The Ghosts of Belfast* is a tale of revenge and reconciliation shrouded in a bloody original crime thriller. . . . Fierce dialogue and the stark political realities of a Northern Ireland recovering from the ‘Troubles’ drive this novel. It’s not difficult to read this brilliant book as an allegory for a brutal past that must be confronted so the present ‘can be clean.’” —CAROLE BARROWMAN, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Brutality abounds. . . . Neville has a good grasp of the niceties and perversities of Northern Ireland politics.”—*Dallas Morning News*

“[I]mpressive.”—*The Guardian* (UK)

“Here’s one more novel that is sure to find placement at or near the top of many Best of 2009 lists. . . . Along the way, author Neville condenses the fear and hate that troubled Ireland for so long, at the same time creating a memorable character with ease and a cool, deceptively straightforward writing style.”—DICK ADLER, *The Rap Sheet*

“Neville’s novel deals in a very pragmatic way with contemporary issues, but he isn’t afraid to introduce some very old-fashioned concepts, not least of which are guilt, redemption and—potentially, at least—a spiritual salvation. . . . Neville has the talent to believably blend the tropes of the crime novel and those of a horror, in the process creating a page-turning thriller akin to a collaboration between John Connolly and Stephen King. . . . [*The Ghosts of Belfast*] is a superb thriller, and one of the first great post-Troubles novels to emerge from Northern Ireland.”—*Sunday Independent* (UK)

“Just when you thought the invasion of excellent Irish crime writers—a group nicknamed Celtic Noir—had ended, along comes Stuart Neville with his first novel. . . . Neville condenses the fear and hate that troubled Ireland for so long, at the same time creating a memorable character with ease and a cool, deceptively straightforward writing style.”—*Barnes and Noble Review*

“Stuart Neville’s superb debut novel . . . is a brilliant thriller: unbearably tense, stomach-churningly frightening. Fegan and his nemesis, the government double agent Davy Campbell, are magnificent creations: not sympathetic, but never wholly repugnant. And just as haunting as Fegan’s apparitions are Neville’s stunning re-imaginings of the darkest atrocities: the bombs, the beatings, the torture, the point-blank murders. . . . It is impressive indeed to create an entertainment out of such material, but more than that, Neville has boldly exposed post-ceasefire Northern Ireland as a confused, contradictory place, a country trying to carve out a future amid a peace recognized by the populace as hypocritical, but accepted as better than the alternative. This is the best fictional representation of the Troubles I have come across, a future classic of its time. Stuart Neville has finally given Northern Ireland the novel its singular history deserves.”—*The Observer* (UK)

“If you read only one thriller on your summer holiday, then make sure it is Neville’s stunning debut. It’s an astonishing first novel, set in today’s Northern Ireland, and the subject matter could not be more controversial: it features a former paramilitary contract killer who is haunted by his victims. Twelve ghosts shadow his every waking hour and scream through every single one of his drunken nights. Written with a wonderful touch for the politics of the post-Good Friday agreement, it is as fresh and subtle as you could wish for. Awesomely powerful, fabulously written, and with a hero who is also a villain that you cannot help sympathizing with, this novel is simply unmissable.”—*Daily Mail* (UK)

"[*The Ghosts of Belfast*] is a revenge tragedy in the Elizabethan mode, scripted by Quentin Tarantino and produced by the makers of *The Bourne Identity*. . . . But it possesses a profound and wider significance. . . . [It] is an important part of [Northern Ireland's] purging."—*Irish Times* (UK)

"Stuart Neville's blistering debut thriller is a walk on the wild side of post-conflict Northern Ireland that brilliantly exposes the suffering still lurking beneath the surface of reconciliation and the hypocrisies that sustain the peace." —*Metro* (UK)

"Neville's debut is as unrelenting as Fegan's ghosts, pulling no punches as it describes the brutality of Ireland's 'troubles' and the crime that has followed, as violent men find new outlets for their skills. Sharp prose places readers in this pitiless place and holds them there. Harsh and unrelenting crime fiction, masterfully done."—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

"[A] stunning debut. . . . This is not only an action-packed, visceral thriller but also an insightful insider's glimpse into the complex political machinations and networks that maintain the uneasy truce in Northern Ireland."—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

"In this well-crafted and intriguing series debut, Neville evokes the terrors of living in Belfast during 'the Troubles' and manages to makes Fegan, a murderer many times over, a sympathetic character . . . The buzz around this novel is well deserved and readers will be anticipating the next book in the series."—*Library Journal*, Starred Review

"Neville's debut novel is tragic, violent, exciting, plausible, and compelling. . . . *The Ghosts of Belfast* is dark, powerful, insightful, and hard to put down."—*Booklist*

"Stuart Neville will go far as a writer. . . . It's a wonderful novel, brave and fierce and true to its place and time. I sincerely hope it sells a million copies."—DECLAN BURKE, *Crimespree*

"Both a fine novel and a gripping thriller: truly this is a magnificent debut."—RUTH DUDLEY EDWARDS, author of *Ten Lords A-Leaping*

"Neville's debut thriller grabs hold and doesn't let go . . . [a] frighteningly assured first novel." —GEORGE EASTER, *Deadly Pleasures*

Also by Stuart Neville
The Ghosts of Belfast

Stuart Neville

COLLUSION

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For Nat Sobel, who changed my life

I

“We’re being followed,” Eugene McSorley said. The Ford Focus crested the rise, weightless for a moment, and thudded hard back onto the tarmac. Its eight-year-old suspension did little to cushion the impact. McSorley kept his eyes on the rear-view mirror, the silver Skoda Octavia lost behind the hill he’d just sped over. It had been tailing them along the narrow country road since they crossed the border into the North.

Comiskey twisted in the passenger seat. “I don’t see anyone,” he said. “No, wait. Fuck. Is that the peelers?”

“Aye,” McSorley said. The Skoda reappeared in his mirror, its windows tinted dark green. He couldn’t make out the occupants, but they were cops all right. The tarmac darkened under the growing drizzle, the sky a blank, heavy sheet of gray above the green fields.

“Jesus,” Hughes moaned from the back seat. “Are we going to get pulled?”

“Looks like it,” Comiskey said. “Fuck.”

Hedgerows streaked past the Focus. McSorley checked his speed, staying just below sixty. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “We’ve nothing on us. Not unless you boys have any blow in your pockets.”

“Shit,” Hughes said.

“What?”

“I’ve an eighth on me.”

McSorley shot a look back over his shoulder. “Arsehole. Chuck it.”

McSorley hit the switch to roll down the rear window and pulled close to the hedgerow so the cops wouldn’t see. He watched his side mirror as Hughes’s hand flicked a small brown cube into the greenery. “Arsehole,” he repeated.

Comiskey peered between the seats. “They’re not getting any closer,” he said. “Maybe they won’t pull us.”

McSorley said nothing. He raised the rear window again. The car rounded a bend onto a long straight, the road falling away in a shallow descent before rising to meet the skyline half a mile ahead. He flicked the wipers on. They left wet smears across the windscreen, barely shifting the water. He’d meant to replace them a year ago. McSorley cursed and squinted through the raindrops.

A white van sat idling at a side road. It had all the time in the world to ease out and be on its way. It didn’t. Instead it inched forward to the junction, the driver holding it on the clutch. McSorley wet his lips. He felt the accelerator beneath the sole of his shoe. The Focus had a decent engine, but the suspension was shot. Once the road started to twist, he wouldn’t have a chance. He eased off the pedal. The van drew closer. Two men in the cabin, watching.

McSorley’s stomach flipped between light and heavy, heavy and light, while adrenalin rippled out to his fingers and toes. He fought the heaving in his chest.

“Christ,” he said out loud, without meaning to. “Nothing to worry about. They’re only cops. They’re going to pull us, that’s all.”

The Focus neared the white van, and McSorley saw the men’s faces. They stared back as he passed. His eyes went to the mirror. The Skoda’s reflection swelled. Blue lights flickered behind the grille, and its siren whooped. The van edged a foot or two out of the junction.

The Skoda accelerated, disappeared from the mirror, and reappeared alongside the Focus. McSorley saw white shirts and dark epaulets. The woman cop in the passenger seat signaled to the side of the road.

“Fuck,” McSorley said. He gently squeezed the brake and shifted down. The Skoda slipped past as he let the Focus mount the grass verge. It skidded on the wet grass and mud. The Skoda stopped a few yards ahead. Its reversing lights glared, and it rolled back to stop just feet from the Focus’s bonnet.

“Keep your mouths shut, boys,” McSorley said. “Answer them

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when they talk to you, but don't give them any lip. Don't give them any excuses. Right?"

"Right," Hughes said from the back.

"Right?" McSorley said to Comiskey.

Comiskey gave him a quivering smile. "Aye, no worries."

Two cops got out of the car, donning hats and bright reflective jackets. The woman wasn't bad looking, light brown hair swept up under her cap. The man was tall and in good shape. His rich tan looked alien beneath the gray sky. They approached the Focus, the man leading.

The wipers scraped across the windscreen, the rubber-on-glass creak in counterpoint to McSorley's heartbeat. He put his finger on the button, ready to lower the window when the cop asked. Instead, the cop grabbed the handle and opened the door. Rain leaked in. It had been raining for nearly three months solid. All day, every day, no let-up. McSorley blinked as a heavy drop splashed on his cheek.

"Afternoon," the cop said. He had an English accent, hard and clipped. "Shut your engine off, please, sir."

McSorley turned the key. The engine died, freezing the wipers in mid-sweep.

"Just keep your hands where I can see them, there's a good chap," the cop said.

That accent, McSorley thought. Officer class. It spoke of parade grounds and stiff salutes, not traffic patrols and police checkpoints.

The cop ducked his head down. "You too, gentlemen."

Comiskey put his hands on the dashboard; Hughes placed his on the back of the passenger seat. McSorley gripped the steering wheel and studied the cop's face. His skin was a deep brown, not the shallow tan of a week at the beach. His lips were shiny from balm applied to the cracks, as if they'd been baked in some arid place. A vision of this cop crawling across a desert flashed in McSorley's mind. The image terrified him, and he couldn't think why.

The cop's hands stayed out of view until he reached in and took the key from the ignition. A black leather glove, expensive looking.

“What do you want?” McSorley asked. His voice bubbled in his throat.

The cop straightened and looked back down the road. “You’re not wearing your seat belt. Any reason?”

“I forgot,” McSorley said. He looked to the rear-view mirror, knowing what he’d see. The van pulled out of the junction, turning toward them.

The woman cop walked to the passenger side. She leaned down and peered in, first at Comiskey, then at Hughes. Comiskey gave her a weak smile. She did not return it.

“Well, that won’t do,” the tanned cop said. “You don’t want points on your license, do you?”

The van filled the rear-view mirror. The woman cop waved, and it pulled alongside the Focus. The tanned cop reached in and hit the button to open the boot. It would have sprung up a good six inches when the car was new, but now it just loosened itself from the seal. The woman cop went to the back of the Focus, and the boot lid whined as she opened it fully. Cold, damp air kissed the back of McSorley’s neck. The smell of manure from the fields around them mixed with the bitter sting of his own sweat.

The two men stayed in the van’s cabin, but McSorley heard heavy feet moving inside, and then its rear doors opening. He went to crane his head around, but the tanned cop hunkered down beside him, smiling.

McSorley studied the peeler’s face and all at once knew every tale the lines and cracks told. He had been in a dry and barren place, crawling in the dirt, hunting his prey. Iraq, maybe Afghanistan. Maybe somewhere the Yanks and the Brits would never admit to. And now he was here, not far from the Irish border, his sun-scorched face blank and unyielding. Just another job.

“You’re not a peeler,” McSorley said.

The cop’s hard smile didn’t even flicker. “Where are you headed today, sir?”

“I said, you’re no peeler. What do you want?”

Footsteps scuffled behind the two vehicles. Something screeched

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and groaned as it was dragged along the floor of the van. Voices issued orders, hissed and strained. The cop's eyes never left McSorley's.

A voice said, "On three. One, two, three—hup!"

The Focus lurched and leaned back on its rear axle as something monstrously heavy was dumped in the boot.

"What the fuck was that?" Comiskey asked.

Hughes turned in the seat, but the parcel shelf blocked his vision. McSorley watched shifts in the light in his rear-view mirror. He wanted to weep, but smothered the urge. He heard more scuffling, then the thudding of feet clambering back into the van. The car's boot lid slammed down, and McSorley saw the woman cop through the back window, along with a heavy-set man. The parcel shelf didn't quite find home; something pushed it up from beneath.

The woman cop carried a long sports bag. The heavy-set man raised an automatic rifle. It looked like the Heckler & Koch G3 McSorley had fired behind a Newry pub years before. The man approached from the driver's side, keeping the rifle on McSorley.

McSorley felt the heat of tears rising behind his eyes. Fuck if he'd cry. He swallowed them. The rear passenger side door opened. He looked back over his shoulder.

The woman cop reached in and dropped something metallic. Its weight thudded on the carpet between Hughes's feet.

"Oh, fuck," Hughes said. He scuttled sideways, behind McSorley, away from whatever lay there.

She tossed something else in. It clanked against the first object.

"Oh, Jesus," Hughes said, his voice rising into a breathy whine.

The woman drew a pair of long cylinders from the bag. McSorley stared at them for a moment, his brain struggling to catch up with what he saw, before he recognized the twin barrels of a shotgun. She placed it butt-first into the footwell, letting the long barrels fall across Hughes's thigh.

"Fuck me, they're guns," Hughes said as the door swung shut. "What's going on, Eugene?"

McSorley looked back to the tanned cop. The cop smiled, winked, and closed the driver's door. He held up the car key, showed it to

McSorley, and thumbed it twice. The locks whirred and clunked. The cop placed the key on the bonnet, just beneath the glass.

“Christ,” McSorley said.

“What are they doing, Eugene?” Comiskey asked.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” McSorley crossed himself. His bladder screamed for release. He fought it.

The two cops, who McSorley knew were not cops at all, got back into the Skoda and pulled away. The van eased in front of the Focus. The man with the rifle grinned at McSorley. He kept the gun trained on him as he climbed into the open back.

Comiskey tried the handle. “Open the locks,” he said.

“Can’t,” McSorley said. Tears warmed his cheeks. “The bastard double-locked it. You need the key to open it.”

The van moved off, picking up speed. The man with the rifle waved. McSorley’s bladder gave out.

“Oh, God,” McSorley said. “Jesus, boys.”

Comiskey slammed the window with his elbow. He tried it again. Hughes lifted the shotgun and rammed the butt against the rear window.

McSorley knew it was pointless. “Oh, Christ, boys.”

Hughes hit the window once more, and it shattered. He lurched to the opening. Comiskey scrambled to climb back and follow.

Waves of rainwater smeared the windscreen as the van grew smaller in the distance. Hughes roared as he forced his shoulders through the gap.

“Jesus,” McSorley whispered. “Jesus, boys, they killed us.”

He barely registered the detonator’s POP! before God’s fist slammed him into nothing.

Detective Inspector Jack Lennon knew it was shit work, but the choice had been made clear: keep an eye on Dandy Andy Rankin and Rodney Crozier as they met in a greasy spoon café on Sandy Row, or spend the rest of the week typing up notes for the Public Prosecution Service. His buttocks still ached from the stint of PPS donkey work they'd dumped on him last year. He didn't fancy another taste.

The information had been passed along from C3, or Special Branch, as most people knew them. Rankin and Crozier, two of Belfast's leading Loyalists, were to meet at Sylvia's to try to settle an argument that had so far put five men in hospital. One had lost an eye, another was breathing through a tube in his throat, but no one had died yet. The plan was to keep it that way.

Spats between the Loyalists were a constant nuisance. Every few weeks a thug or two would turn up with his head broken over some quarrel or other. But sometimes the spats boiled over and people got killed. No one on the force cared too much if the odd drug dealer got taken out, but it would rile the politicians and the press, not to mention the paperwork it would generate. So it was best to keep tabs on things, try to head off trouble at the pass. That's what Chief Inspector Uprichard had said when he assigned Lennon the job. Lennon had been at a loose end since he'd lost his place on the Major Investigation Team, so this sort of busywork was the best he could hope for. Observe and report, see who's talking to whom, judge if the exchanges are friendly or heated, make sure it's not something that could escalate.

Lennon watched the café from a van with Water Board markings. He'd parked up in a side street across the way, put a lunch box and a flask on the dashboard, and opened a copy of the *Belfast Telegraph*. He

had spread the pages across the steering wheel fifteen minutes ago and settled in.

Rankin and Crozier sat by the window. Lennon could see them clear as day, but could only imagine their conversation. There was no money in the pot for bugging the place. The pair were only of mild interest to Special Branch, so did not merit the budget. This was strictly eyeball duty, nothing more. Yep, Lennon thought, shit work. Part of him wondered if they just wanted to get him out of the office.

The targets huddled together, their proximity suggesting soft voices, even if the expressions on their faces did not. Crozier wore a Glasgow Rangers football top, his tattoos blurring on his thick forearms. Rankin sported a gray suit with a pink shirt, open at the collar to display his heavy gold chain. His teeth looked unnaturally white against his orange tan. Sylvia Burrows, the café's proprietor since it had opened in the early seventies, placed two steaming mugs between the men. She did not linger to make chitchat. The men barely acknowledged her.

Lennon scribbled on the pad in his lap and looked at his watch. Twenty minutes now since he'd pulled up, ten since Crozier had arrived, no more than five since Rankin had joined him. Lennon yawned and stretched. Maybe the PPS paperwork wouldn't have been so bad.

Just a few weeks ago he'd been on a Major Investigation Team, second to DCI Jim Thompson. Good work, proper police graft befitting his rank. He'd pissed it away over a bloody speeding penalty he'd tried to get quashed for that piece of shit Roscoe Patterson. The traffic cop, Constable Joseph Moore, had come over all self-righteous when Lennon tackled him.

It wasn't the sixty quid, Lennon had explained, money wasn't the issue. Roscoe had plenty of money. Lennon might have said that last part twice, he couldn't quite remember. The issue was the three points Roscoe couldn't afford on his license. Things got heated when Moore, one of the newer Catholic recruits filling up the ranks since the Patten reforms, questioned why Lennon would stick his neck out for a Hun bastard like Roland "Roscoe" Patterson. Lennon knew he shouldn't

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have grabbed Moore's throat and pushed him against the wall, and he apologized the next day. He didn't know, however, that Moore had gone to CI Uprichard and claimed Lennon had tried to pass on an offer of a bribe from a known Loyalist paramilitary.

Thus Lennon found himself in front of Uprichard's desk being offered the choice of unpaid leave or a full disciplinary hearing. Without his old friend DCI Dan Hewitt's intervention, the latter would have been the only option. Uprichard reminded Lennon that his record was not unblemished, and a hearing would be unlikely to do him any good, even if the allegation couldn't be proven.

Lennon chose leave. He sat at home for three days before boredom got the better of him. On the fourth day he boarded a flight to Barcelona. The hotel was a pit. George Orwell was supposed to have stayed there during the Spanish Civil War. From the looks of it, he'd picked the wallpaper. But the room had a balcony overlooking Las Ramblas, and the weather allowed him to sit out in the evenings with a can of San Miguel, watching the tourists and the locals avoid each other's eyes on the street below. When midnight came, he toured the tapas bars, looking for American or English women he could charm with his accent. Most nights, he succeeded.

He returned from Barcelona only to feel like a spare wheel, no real use to anybody, so every crappy meaningless job came his way. Including this one.

Rankin and Crozier's hands became more animated. Fingers stabbed at the tabletop as points were made. The mugs shook. Lennon blinked and focused, shifted in the driver's seat, leaned forward.

Crozier held up his hands, palms out, maybe trying to placate the other man. Rankin didn't look like he was having any of it. His forefinger wagged in Crozier's face. Crozier sat back, his shoulders slumping in exasperation.

Lennon glanced down to his pad and noted the change in tone. When he looked up, Crozier was on his feet, turning to leave.

Good, Lennon thought. If it was over, he could get the fuck out of there and type up the notes. That done, he could wait around for some more shit work.

Rankin tugged at Crozier's sleeve. Crozier slapped his hand away. Rankin stood, his chair tipping over.

"Jesus," Lennon said to the empty van. "This is getting a bit tasty."

Rankin pulled a knife from his pocket and buried the blade between Crozier's ribs.

Lennon blinked, tried to make sense of what he'd just seen. "Fuck," he said.

Rankin withdrew the blade. Crozier didn't go down. He stared at the other man, his mouth slack. Rankin drove the blade home again.

"Christ," Lennon said. He reached for the radio, hit the emergency button. It would send a signal out to every receiver on the network, saying an officer needed assistance, pinpointing his position.

Crozier swung a fist, throwing Rankin back, still clutching the knife. Rankin tumbled over the chair, disappeared from view. Crozier put a big hand to his side, pulled it away, examined the bright red on his fingers. He staggered back until he met the wall.

Lennon opened the glovebox and grabbed the Glock 17 and the wallet with his ID. He threw the door open and stepped out. He shoved the wallet down into his pocket and pressed the Glock against his thigh. He ducked into the traffic, his gaze fixed on the window, adrenalin crackling through him, sending sparks to his fingertips.

Rankin reappeared, clambered over the chair toward Crozier. The bigger man put his hands up, but too slow. The blade punctured his neck.

A car horn blared and tires squealed as Lennon crossed the road. A woman screamed inside the café. Lennon raised the Glock. Crozier slid down the tiled wall, Rankin over him, the knife ready to come down again.

Lennon hit the door shoulder first, raised the Glock and aimed to where Crozier lay bleeding. No Rankin. The woman screamed again. Lennon wheeled the gun around, saw Rankin seize Sylvia's hair, bring the blade to her throat. Sylvia gasped, eyes wide behind thick glasses. Rankin held her close.

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Lennon pulled his wallet and flipped it open. He showed Rankin the ID and tucked the wallet away again. He leveled the pistol, left hand supporting the right, shoulders set for the recoil.

“Let her go, Andy,” Lennon said.

Rankin back-pedaled, dragging Sylvia with him by her hair. He glanced over his shoulder and guided her behind the counter toward the rear door.

“Don’t, Andy,” Lennon said as he followed. “The alley’s closed off. There’s walls at either end. You can’t go anywhere.”

Rankin pulled Sylvia tight to him, the blade up under her chin. Lennon saw red on her skin. He couldn’t tell if it was Crozier’s blood or hers.

“Oh Jesus help me,” Sylvia said.

“You’re all right, Sylvia,” Lennon said as he reached the counter. He gave her the easiest smile he could manage. “Andy’s not going to hurt you. Everyone round here likes you too much. Where’d they go for their fish and chips if anything happened to you, eh? No more pasties, no more sausage suppers. Everyone knows Sylvia does the best feed in town, right? Right?”

Sylvia didn’t answer as Rankin backed toward the door.

“How’s that going to go down around here if Andy hurts you, eh? He won’t be able to show his face. Come on, Andy, let her go. We can sort it out. Crozier’s still breathing. Don’t make it worse.”

Lennon searched for some sign of doubt or panic on Rankin’s face, found nothing but dead eyes set in his tanned skin.

“I’ll cut this old bitch open,” Rankin said, his lips moving against her dyed hair. “Don’t think I won’t.”

“No,” Lennon said, taking a step closer. “You’re not that stupid. Everyone knows how smart you are, right? You can’t get away. Even if you could, where would you run to? This isn’t the Dandy Andy we all know.”

“Don’t call me that.” Rankin pointed the blade at Lennon. “Nobody calls me that to my face.”

“Sorry,” Lennon said. He raised his hands, the Glock aimed at the ceiling, in apology. “I didn’t think. I’m not a thinker like you. You’re

the smart one in your crew, that's how you got where you are today, right?"

Rankin brought the blade back to Sylvia's throat. "Don't come any closer."

Lennon stopped. "You know you can't go anywhere. You know you can't hurt Sylvia. You're too smart to do that. It's time to think, Andy. What's the best thing to do? What's the smart thing to do?"

"Christ," Rankin said. The death slipped from his eyes. Fear replaced it, childish panic, reason about to flee.

"Easy, Andy," Lennon said. He held his hands out to his sides, the Glock aimed toward the hotplates and fryers at the back of the open kitchen. "Take a few breaths, all right? Let's be calm about this. Let's be smart."

Rankin gulped air, and the sanity returned to his face. "All right," he said. "How do we get out of this?"

"Let Sylvia go for a start," Lennon said. "Then put the knife down."

Streets away, a siren wailed.

"They'll be here soon," Lennon said. "Best if we're all calm by then, eh? You and me just sitting at a table waiting for them, right? "Cause if they come storming in with you and me facing off like this, it could get tricky. Right?"

Rankin looked to the windows at the front of the café. His mouth curled as the panic threatened to take him again. Dead calm overcame it.

"Right," he said.

"Good man," Lennon said. "Now, just let go—"

Rankin shoved Sylvia at Lennon. The top of her head cracked against his chin. They both tumbled backward. Lennon grabbed the counter with one hand, reclaimed his balance, cradled Sylvia with the other arm. A cool draft washed around them from the open door as Rankin vanished through it.

Lennon gathered Sylvia to him. "You all right?"

She gawped at him through her crooked glasses, her mouth opening and closing.

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“Sit down,” he said, forgetting Rankin for a moment. Even if the prick got out of the alley, he’d be lifted in no time. Sylvia was more important right now. He lowered her to the floor, her back against the rear of the counter. “Deep breaths. You’re all right.”

Lennon went to rise, but she clutched at his shoulders. He crouched beside her, wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and kissed the top of her head.

“You’re safe,” he said.

He stood, looked at Crozier’s bloodied form propped against the wall. The Loyalist’s shoulders rose and fell as he moaned. He’ll live, Lennon thought. He went for the door and the alley beyond, Glock up and forward.

Rankin clung to the wall at the northern end of the alley, grunting as he tried to haul himself up.

“You should’ve used the wheelie bin,” Lennon called.

Rankin dropped the two or three feet to the ground and turned.

“It’s right here,” Lennon said, indicating the plastic bin by the door. “You could’ve put it up against the wall, climbed on top, and you’d have been away.”

Rankin pressed his back against the brickwork. His breath came in hard rasps, his eyes bulging. He still held the knife in his right hand.

“Why’d you have to scare poor Sylvia like that?” Lennon asked. He stopped a few feet from Rankin. “You can knife shit-bags like Rodney Crozier all day long for all I care, but putting the frighteners on a nice lady like Sylvia? That’s not on.”

Rankin raised the knife. Sweat beaded on his forehead. “You keep away from me.”

“Or what?”

The siren drew close, another not far behind it.

“Stay back,” Rankin said. He grimaced and hissed through his teeth. His face reddened.

“Or what, Andy?”

“Or . . .” Rankin dropped the knife and clutched his left arm with his right hand. He went down on one knee. His hands went to his

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sternum as if trying to hold his heart in place. His jaw muscles bunched and bulged as his face went from red to purple. “Fuck me,” he said between gritted teeth.

He hit the ground face first.

“Jesus,” Lennon said.