

ALEX BARCLAY

Darkhouse



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PROLOGUE

New York City

Edgy hands slid across the narrow belt, securing it in place on the tiny eight-year-old waist. Donald Riggs pointed to the small box attached.

‘This is like a pager, honey, so the police can find you,’ came his lazy drawl.

‘Because you’re going home now. If your mommy is a good girl. Is your mommy a good girl, Hayley?’

Hayley’s mouth moved, but she couldn’t speak. She bit down on her lip and looked up at him, beaming innocence. She gave three short nods. He smiled and slowly stroked her dark hair.

The fourth day without her daughter was the final day Elise Gray would have to endure a pain she could barely express. She breathed deeply through

anger and rage, guilty that it was caused more by her husband than the stranger who took away her child. Gordon Gray's company had just gone public, making him a very wealthy man and an instant target for kidnap and ransom. The family was insured – but that was all about the money, and she didn't care about the money. Her family was her life and Hayley, her shining light.

Now here she was, parked outside her own apartment at the wheel of her husband's BMW, waiting for this creep to call her on the cell phone he left with the ransom note. Yet it was Gordon who dominated her thoughts. The insurance company had told the couple to vary their routine but, good God, what would Gordon know about varying his routine? This was a man who brewed coffee, made toast, then lined up an apple, a banana and a peach yoghurt – in that order – every morning for breakfast. Every morning. *You stupid man*, thought Elise. *You stupid man and your stupid, stupid, rituals. No wonder someone was waiting outside the apartment for you. Of course you were going to show up, because you show up every day at the same time bringing Hayley home from school. No detours, no stops for candy, just right on time, every time.*

She banged her head on the steering wheel as the cell phone on the seat beside her lit up. As she fumbled to answer it, she realised it was playing *Sesame Street*. He'd actually set the tone to *Sesame Street*, the sick bastard.

'Drive, bitch,' each word slow and deliberate.

'Where am I going?' she asked.

'To get your daughter back, if you've been behavin' yourself.' He hung up.

Elise started the engine, put her foot on the gas and swung gently into the traffic. Her heart was thumping. The wire chafed her back. By calling the police in that first hour, she had set in motion a whole new ending to this ordeal. She just wasn't sure if it was the right ending.

Detective Joe Lucchesi sat in the driver's seat, watching everything, his head barely moving. His dark hair was cut tight, with short slashes of grey at the sides. He questioned again whether Elise Gray was strong enough to wear a wire. He didn't know where the kidnapper would lead her or how she would react if she had to get any closer to him than the other end of a phone. He had barely raised his hand to his face when Danny Markey – his close friend of twenty-five years and partner for five – started talking.

'See, you got the kinda jaw a man can stroke. If I did that, I'd look like an idiot.'

Joe stared at him. Danny was missing a jawline. His small head blended without contour into his skinny neck. Everything about him was pale – his skin, his freckles, his blue eyes. He squinted at Joe.

'What?' he said.

Joe's gaze shifted back to Elise Gray's car. It started to move. Danny gripped the dashboard. Joe knew it was because he expected him to pull right out. Danny had a theory; one of his 'black and whites', as he called them. 'There are people in life who check for toilet paper before taking a crap. And there's the ones who shit straightaway and find themselves fucked.' Joe was often singled out. 'You're a checker, Lucchesi. I'm a shitter,' he would say. So they waited.

'You know Old Nic is getting out next month,' said Danny. Victor Nicotero was a lifer, a traffic cop one month shy of retiring. 'You goin' to the party?'

Joe shook his head, then sucked in a sharp breath against the pain that pulsed at his temples. He could see Danny hanging for an answer. He didn't give him one. He reached into the driver's door and pulled out a bottle of Advil and a blister pack of decongestants. He popped two of each, swallowing them with a mouthful from a blue energy drink hot from the sun.

'Oh, I forgot,' said Danny, 'your in-laws are in from Paris that night, right?' He laughed. 'A six-hour dinner with people you can't understand.' He laughed again.

Joe pulled out after Elise Gray. Three cars behind him, a navy blue Crown Vic with FBI Agents Maller and Holmes followed his lead.

Elise Gray drove aimlessly, searching the sidewalks for Hayley as though she would show up on a corner and jump in. The tinny ringtone broke the silence. She grabbed the phone to her ear.

'Where are you now, Mommy?' His calm voice chilled her.

'2nd Avenue at 63rd Street.'

'Head south and make a left onto the bridge at 59th Street.'

'Left onto the bridge at 59th Street.' Click.

The three cars made their way across the bridge to Northern Boulevard East, everyone's fate in the hands of Donald Riggs. He made his final call.

'Take a left onto Francis Lewis Boulevard, then left onto 29th Avenue. I'll be seein' you. On your own. At the corner of 157th and 29th.'

Elise repeated what he said. Joe and Danny looked at each other.

'Bowne Park,' said Joe.

He dialled the head of the task force, Lieutenant Crane then handed the phone to Danny and nodded for him to talk.

'Looks like the drop-off's Bowne Park. Can you call in some of the guys from the 109?' Danny put the phone on the dash.

Donald Riggs drove smoothly, his eyes moving across the road, the streets, the people. His left hand moved over the rough tangle of scars on his cheek, faded now into skin that was a pale stain on his

tanned face. He checked himself in the rear-view mirror, opening his dark eyes wide. He raised a hand to run his fingers through his hair, until he remembered the gel and hairspray that held it rigid and marked by the tracks of a wide-toothed comb. At the back, it stopped dead at his collar, the right side folding over the left. He had a special lady to impress. He had splashed on aftershave from a dark blue bottle and gargled cinnamon mouthwash.

He turned around to check on the girl, lying on the floor in the back of the car and covered by a stinking blanket.

It was four-thirty p.m. and five detectives were sitting in the twentieth Precinct office of Lieutenant Terry Crane as Old Nic shuffled by, patting down his silver hair. *Maybe they're talking about my retirement present*, he thought, narrowing his grey eyes, leaning towards the muffled voices. *If it's a carriage clock, I'll kill them.* A watch he could cope with. Even better, his boy Lucchesi had picked up on his hints and spread the word – Old Nic was planning to write his memoirs and what he needed for that was something he'd never had before: a classy pen, something silver, something he could take out with his good notebook and tell a story with. He put a bony shoulder to the door and his cap slipped on his narrow head. He heard Crane briefing the detectives.

'We've just found out the perp is heading for

Bowne Park in Queens. We still don't have an ID. We got nothing from canvassing the neighbourhood, we got nothing from the scene – the guy jumped out, picked up the girl and drove off at speed, leaving nothing behind. We don't even know what he was driving. This is just from the father who heard the screech from the lobby. We also got nothing from the package the perp dropped back the following day, just a few common fibres from the tape, nothing workable, no prints.'

Old Nic opened the door and stuck his head in. 'Where'd this kidnapping happen?'

'Hey, Nic,' said Crane, '72nd and Central Park West.' With no clues to his retirement present apparent in the office, Old Nic moved on, until a thought came to him and he doubled back.

'This guy is headed for Bowne Park, you gotta figure the area's familiar to him. Maybe he was going that way the day of the kidnapping, so he could have headed east across 42nd Street to the FDR. I used to work at the 17th and if your guy ran a red light, there's a camera at 42nd and 2nd might have given him a Kodak moment. You could check with the D.O.T.'

'Scratch that carriage clock,' Crane said to the group, winking. 'Nice one, Nic. We're on it.' Old Nic raised a hand as he left. 'You just want to hug the guy,' said Crane as he put a call in to the Department of Transportation. Thirty minutes

later, he had five hits, three with criminal records. But only one had a prior for attempted kidnapping.

Joe could feel the drugs kick in. A warm cloud of relief moved up his jaw. He opened and closed his mouth. His ears crackled. He breathed through his nose and out slowly through his mouth. Six years ago, everything from his neck up started to go wrong – he got headaches, earaches, pain in his jaw so excruciating that some days it was unbearable to eat or even talk. Strangers didn't react well to a dumb cop.

Hayley Gray was thinking about *Beauty and the Beast*. Everyone thought the Beast was mean and scary, but he was really a nice guy and he gave Belle soup and he played in the snow with her. Maybe the man wasn't all bad. Maybe he'd turn out to be nice too. The car stopped suddenly and she felt cold. She heard her mommy shouting.

'Hayley! Hayley!' Then, 'Where's my daughter? You've got your money. Give me back my daughter, you bastard!'

Her mommy sounded really scared. She'd never heard her shout like that before or say bad words. She was banging on the window. Then the car was moving again, faster this time, and she couldn't hear her mommy any more. Donald Riggs

threw open the knapsack, his right hand pulling at the tightly-packed wads.

Danny reached for his radio to run the plates of the brown Chevy Impala that was driving away from Elise Gray: 'North Homicide to Central.' He waited for Central to acknowledge, then gave the number. 'Adam David Larry 4856, A.D.L. 4856.'

Joe was on Citywide One, a two-way channel that linked him to Maller and Holmes and the 109 guys in the park. He spoke quickly and clearly.

'OK, he's got the money, but he hasn't said anything about dropping off the girl. We need to take it easy here. We don't know where he has her. Everyone stand by.'

Danny turned to him and gave his usual line. 'And his voice was restored and there was much rejoicing.'

Halfway down 29th Avenue, Donald Riggs stopped the car, reached back and lifted the blanket.

'Get up and get out of my car.'

Hayley pulled herself onto the seat. 'Thank you,' she said. 'I knew you'd be nice.'

She opened the door, got out and looked around until she could see her mother. Then she ran as fast as her little legs could carry her.

Joe and Danny were behind Riggs now, Agents Maller and Holmes behind them. Danny was

holding for the information on the car. Joe was distracted. He had a feeling this was bad; the kind of bad that happens when everything is too easy, when the maniac is so fucked up, it gets scary calm. He looked at Danny.

‘Why would the guy give this woman her child back without a scratch?’ He shook his head. ‘It’s too easy.’

He slammed on the brakes and, arm out the window, waved the Crown Vic ahead of him. Agent Maller gave a quick nod and took the right, eyes locked on the car ahead.

Joe turned around and saw the swaying shape of a mother and daughter reunited. Too easy. He got out of the car, grabbing his vibrating cell phone from the dash. He flipped it open. It was Crane.

‘We got your perp.’

‘Brown Chevy Impala,’ said Joe.

‘Yup. ’85. Riggs, Donald, white male, thirty-four, born in shitsville, Texas, locked up for petty larceny, scams, bad cheques, collared at the scene of a previous kidnapping.’ He hesitated.

‘And be advised, Lucchesi, he was done for C4 in Nevada in ’97. We got ourselves a boom-boom banjo-player.’ Joe dropped the phone, his heart pounding.

‘I got ESU and hostage negotiation on stand-by,’ Crane said to no-one.

Joe began to run. He willed his heart to carry the new pace his legs had taken up.

Donald Riggs had reached the corner of 154th and 29th. He rocked back and forth in his seat, skinny fingers clenching the wheel, eyes darting around, taking in everything, registering nothing. But something caught his eye. Behind him, a black Ford Taurus pulled into the kerb and a dark blue Crown Vic overtook it. A rare heightened awareness flared inside him. He kept driving, his breath shallow as he slowed to a stop at the next corner. Then a sudden burst of activity drew him in. Two men stepped out of a Con Ed van by the entrance to the park. They walked quickly to the back and pulled open the doors. Two others stepped out. In the rear-view mirror, the dark blue car loomed back into sight, driving alarmingly on the wrong side of the road. Donald Riggs lurched across the passenger side, grabbed the knapsack, pushed open the door and tore out of the car towards the park. By the time Maller and Holmes screeched to a stop seconds later, the four FBI agents in Con Ed uniforms were surrounding an empty car. 'Go, go, go,' roared Maller and all six men ran for the park.

'You used my pager!' says Hayley, amazed, pointing down at the belt around her waist and the black box with its flashing yellow light. Her mother stands up, confused, searching out anyone who can understand what this is, but knowing in her heart the answer. Her pleading eyes stop at Joe.

'You stupid bitch, you stupid bitch, you stupid bitch . . .' Donald Riggs is running wildly across the park, clutching at his knapsack, concentrating on a small dark object in his hand. He stops, rooted. His eyes widen and deaden as his mind and body shut down. Then a twitching, after-thought of a movement connects the thumb of his right hand to the black button of a detonator.

Elise Gray knows her fate. She makes a final grab for her child, hugging her desperately to her chest. 'I love you, sweetheart, I love you, sweetheart, I love you.' Then a frightening, shockingly loud blast tears through them, the bright light stinging Joe's eyes as he watches, now motionless. Then red and pink and white, splattering grotesquely, as a confetti shower of leaves and splintered bark falls around the place where a mother and daughter, seconds earlier, didn't even make it to goodbye.

Joe was absolutely still, paralysed. He couldn't breathe. He felt a new throbbing pressure in his jaw. His eyes streamed. He slowly sensed warm concrete against his face. He pulled himself up from the pavement. Too many emotions flooded his body. The radio on his belt crackled to life. It was Maller.

'We lost him. He's in the park, heading your way, along by the playground.'

Now one emotion overrode all others: rage.

'I don't think your mommy was a good girl, Hayley, I don't think your mommy was a good girl,' Riggs was howling, ranting, rocking wildly, bent over, his face contorted. He clawed desperately at the inside pocket of his coat. Joe burst through the trees, suddenly faced with this deranged display, but ready, his Glock 9mm drawn.

'Put your hands where I can see them.'

He couldn't remember his name. Riggs looked up; his arm jerked free, swinging wildly to his right and back again, as Joe pumped six bullets into his chest. Riggs fell backwards, landing to stare sightless at the sky, arms outstretched, palms open. Joe walked over, looking for a weapon he knew did not exist.

But something did lie in Riggs' upturned palm – a maroon and gold pin: a hawk, wings aloft, beak pointing earthwards. He had been gripping it so tightly, it had pierced his palm.

Ely State Prison, Nevada, two days later

‘Shut up, you fuckin’ freak. Shut your fuckin’ ass. I got National Geographic in my fuckin’ ears twenty-four/seven, you sick son of a bitch. Who gives a shit about your fuckin’ birds, Pukey Dukey? Who gives a fuckin’ shit?’

Duke Rawlins lay face down on the bottom bunk of his eight by ten cell. Every muscle in his long, wiry body tensed.

‘Don’t call me that.’ His face was set into a frown, his lips pale and full. He rubbed his head, disturbing the dirty blond hair that grew long at the back, but was cut short above his chill blue eyes.

‘Call you what?’ said Kane. ‘Pukey Dukey?’

Duke hated group. They made him say shit that was nobody’s business. He couldn’t believe this asshole, Kane, knew what the kids used to call him in school.

'This hawk has that wing span, this hawk ripped a jack rabbit a new asshole, this hawk is alpha, this hawk is beta, and this little hawk goes wee, wee, wee, all the way home to you, you sick son of a bitch.'

Duke leapt from his bunk, sliding his arm from under the pillow, pulling out a pared-down, sharpened spike of Plexiglas. He jabbed it towards Kane, who jerked his head back hard against the wall. He jabbed again and again, slicing the air close enough to Kane's face to let him know he meant it.

The warden's voice stopped him.

'Lookin' to book yourself a one-way ticket to Carson City, Rawlins?' Carson City was where Ely's death row inmates took their last breath.

Duke spun around as he unlocked the door and pushed into the cell. The warden smoothed on a surgical glove and calmly took the weapon from a man he knew was too smart to screw up this close to his release.

'Thought you might like to read this, Rawlins,' he said, holding up a printout from the *New York Times* website.

Duke walked slowly towards the warden and stopped. The pockmarked face of Donald Riggs jumped right at him. KIDNAP ENDS IN FATAL EXPLOSION. Mother and daughter dead. Kidnapper fatally wounded. Duke went white. He reached out for the paper, pulling it from the

warden's hand as his legs slid from under him and he slumped on to the floor. 'Not Donnie, not Donnie, not Donnie,' he screamed over and over in his head. Before he passed out, his body suddenly heaved and he threw up all over the floor, spraying the warden's shoes and pants.

Kane jumped down from his bed, kicking Duke in the gut because he could. His laugh was deep and satisfied. 'Pukey fuckin' Dukey. Man, this is quality viewing.'

'Get back to your business, Kane,' said the warden as he turned his back on the stinking cell.

ONE

Waterford, Ireland, one year later

Danaher's is the oldest bar in the south east; stone-floored, wooden and dim. Salvaged timber from unlucky ships stretches in beams under the low ceiling, making shelves for rusty tankards and tangled green fishing nets. Fires live and die in the wide stone hearth. The mensroom is called the jacks and the jacks is outside: two stalls, one with no door. 'And we haven't had a shite stolen yet,' Ed Danaher liked to say when anyone complained.

Joe Lucchesi was undergoing an interrogation at the bar.

'Have you ever said 'Freeze, motherfucker?'' asked Hugh, pushing his glasses up his nose. Hugh was tall and gangly, bowing his head as he talked, always ready to walk through a low doorway. His black hair was pulled into a frizzy

ponytail and his long fingers tucked back the stray strands.

His friend, Ray, rolled his eyes.

‘Or anything you say or do can be held against you in a court of law?’ said Hugh.

Joe laughed.

‘Or found peanut shells in someone’s trousers?’

‘That’s *CSI*, you fuckwit,’ said Ray. ‘Don’t mind him. Seriously, though, have you ever planted evidence?’

They all laughed. Joe couldn’t remember a night when he had gone for a drink without being asked about his old job. Even his friends still pumped him for information.

‘You guys need to get out more,’ he said.

‘Come on, nothing happens in this kip,’ said Hugh.

A kip in Ireland was a dive in America, but to Joe, Mountcannon was far from a dive. It was a charming fishing village that had been his home for the past six months, thanks to his wife, Anna. Concerned for their marriage, their son, Shaun, and the family sanity, she had brought them here to save what she loved. Anna wanted him to quit after his last case, but he didn’t, so they agreed he would vest out for a year – temporary retirement that gave him nine months to decide whether or not he’d go back.

He didn’t know then where that year would take him. Anna was a freelance interior designer

and pitched an idea to *Vogue Living* to renovate an old building, bought by the magazine and shot in stages. The building she chose was Shore's Rock, a deserted weather-beaten lighthouse on the edge of a cliff outside Mountcannon, the village she had fallen in love with when she was seventeen.

When they got there, Joe understood how she felt. But he needed his New York fix. He would go to the local store and pick up *USA Today* or *USA Two Days Ago*. He'd say to Danny Markey, 'If anything big happens back home, call me a couple days later, so I'll know what you're talking about.' In New York, Ireland was Sunday afternoons and WFUV 90.7, *Forty Shades of Green* and *Galway Shawls*. But in an isolated lighthouse near a small village, the real Ireland was not all sentimental ballads . . . and it was far from simple practicalities. He could score a great pint and find a friend in any of Mountcannon's three bars, but try renting a movie, ordering in or finding an ATM. For most people, Ed Danaher played banker and barman, always happy to refill his till with the cash he had just handed out.

Joe stood up, slid some notes across the bar and said goodbye to the two men. He made his way home in fifteen minutes, enjoying the turn of the last bend when the stark, freshly painted white of the lighthouse would rise up from the dark. He pushed open the gate and walked the hundred metres along the lane to the front door.

The site was sloping, carved into the cliff side, and made up of an almost jumbled collection of buildings, dating back to the eighteen-hundreds and added to over the years until it was finally deserted in the late sixties. There were three separate two-storey buildings, two of which could be used as living spaces. The first held the hallway, the kitchen, the living room and the den on the ground floor, and the main bedroom, guest bedroom and bathroom on the first floor. The second building was like a huge basement to the first, set lower into the cliff – a darker small-windowed space. The first storey was Shaun's bedroom and the lower storey, a wine cellar. The third building was the round tower of the lighthouse, a separate structure to the rear of the main house. From the outside, it looked complete, but it was what lay inside that was the biggest challenge. Higher up on the site, above the house, a large shed had been transformed into a fully kitted-out workshop that Joe was still learning to use. He had made some of what Anna called the cruder furniture in the house, but she said it like a compliment, so that was good enough for him.

By the end of the year, she wanted the house to be modern and comfortable, with as many of the original features as she could keep. She was in the right part of the country for that, with carpenters, ironmongers and builders easy to find, but she learned quickly not to be as exacting in

her timings as she would have been in New York. And the usual enticement of a mention in *Vogue* was hardly likely to stir these guys. But even in six months, they had helped to transform the unfulfilled potential of the dank, crumbling rooms and battered exteriors. When the family had first walked into Shore's Rock, it was as if everything had been deserted in a hurry, like some great tragedy had swept old keepers away. It stank of the sea, of damp, of rotting timber. It looked hopeless to Joe and Shaun, but Anna called it perfect dereliction.

Now all the exterior brickwork had been repainted. In the house, underfloor heating had been installed and interior walls and floorboards whitewashed. Simple white wooden furniture with modern touches added minimal decoration to the rooms. Shaun's bedroom was the first to be finished, but only after a satellite dish was installed. Anna had had to do something to stop the spread of his sixteen-year-old angst. For him, the culture shock had been intense, because he was young and his world was so small. He couldn't bear the isolation that for Anna was heaven, removed as she was from the same old faces at the same old press launches and gallery openings, transported now to another era. In Mountcannon, you knew your neighbours, you left your car unlocked and no street was unsafe.

Joe slid into bed beside Anna. 'Assume the

position,' he whispered. She smiled, half asleep, and turned her back to him as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her tiny body towards him. He pressed kisses into the back of her head and fell asleep to the sound of the sea crashing against the rocks.

'Full Irish?' asked Joe, smiling. He was dressed only in jeans, standing over the stove, pointing a greasy spatula at Anna.

'No, no!' she laughed. 'I don't know how they do this every morning. Bacon, eggs, sausages, black pudding, white pudding . . .' She shook her head and walked barefoot across the floor to the cupboard. She stood on tiptoes to reach the top shelf.

'Makes a man out of you,' said Joe.

'Makes a fat man out of you,' said Anna.

'Everyone is fat to a French woman,' said Joe.

'Every American, maybe.'

'That's gotta hurt,' said Shaun, sliding into his chair at the table, stretching his legs wide at either side. 'Bring it on, Dad. I am proud to fly the American flag this morning.' He grabbed his knife and fork and smiled his father's crooked smile. The Lucchesi genes overrode the Briaudes', but what made Shaun so striking was that against the dark hair and sallow skin of his father shone the pale green eyes of his mother.

'Thank you, son,' said Joe.

'But it wouldn't do you any harm to put a shirt on,' said Shaun.

'You're just jealous. And I always fry topless,' said Joe. 'So I don't stink after.'

He dished the food out onto two plates and breathed in dramatically.

'Your mother does not know what she's missing.'

'I do,' said Anna, nodding at Joe's belly. He slapped it.

'One day of crunches, it's gone,' he said. She made a face. He was right. He had always been in shape.

'C'mon, honey,' he said. 'How am I ever going to compete with a woman who shops in the children's department?' She smiled. He pulled a white long-sleeved T-shirt over his head and walked over to the kettle. He took the cafetière down from a shelf beside it, then poured in boiling water and shook it up the sides. When the glass was hot, he threw out the water and tipped four scoops of Kenyan grounds into the bottom. He filled it with water to the edge of the chrome rim. He rinsed the plunger in boiling water and put it on top, twisting it so the opening to the spout was blocked. After four minutes, he plunged gently, watching the grains being pushed slowly to the base of the jug. He rotated the top of the plunger so the grate was lined up with the spout and the coffee would pour. Joe could never watch anyone else make coffee.

'Your father rang last night,' said Anna suddenly. Shaun's eyes widened, but he knew when to stay quiet.

'Sure he did,' said Joe, carrying the coffee to the table.

'He did. He's getting married.'

Joe stared at her. 'You're shitting me.'

'Watch your language. And I'm serious. How could I make that up? He wants you to go over.'

'Jesus Christ. Is it Pam?'

'Of course it's Pam. You're dreadful.'

'Well, you wouldn't know with that guy.'

'He's unbelievable,' said Shaun.

'Yup,' said Joe. 'Roll in the family so you'll look normal to your new husband or wife. "See? My kids are here for my wedding. They're pretty cool. I'm not an axe murderer."''

'Well . . .'

'Well, nothing.'

'Uh, Mom,' said Shaun. 'I hate to change the subject, but do you have any baby photos of me? I mean, did you bring any to Ireland?'

'You know, you would think I wouldn't bother,' said Anna, 'but they were so cute I put a few in my diary. Hold on.'

She brought her diary from the bedroom and pulled three photos from an envelope in the back.

'Look at you,' she said. She held up the first photo, a two-year-old Shaun in the bath, his face smiling through a halo of foam. Then one of him

at four, in camouflage gear, holding a plastic rifle. In the third, he was blowing out five candles on a cake shaped like a beetle.

‘That cake was a nightmare,’ she said. ‘Your father hovering over me the whole time, making sure it was anatomically correct.’

‘That cake was awesome,’ said Shaun. ‘But I’ll go with the GI shot. Cute, but politically incorrect. Like me. The secret bug life might be a bit much.’

‘What’s it for?’ asked Anna.

‘Our school website,’ said Shaun. ‘St Declan’s is actually getting a site. We have this computer teacher, Mr Russell, who was in some massive software firm in the nineties, but burnt out and went into teaching. Anyway, he’s cool. He wants every kid in fifth year to have something posted on the site with a biography. So we all have to bring in photos, kind of like before and afters. From geek to chic.’

Anna laughed. ‘Well, there’s nothing geeky about my little clean-cut army boy,’ she said looking at the photo. ‘Maybe you could be the chic to geek guy,’ she said, eyeing his jeans.

‘Mom, you don’t know the meaning of geek.’

‘Well, what is it, then? Boys in sloppy jeans with shirts down to their knees?’

‘No. That’s someone cool. A geek is a nerd. Think of Dad.’

She hit him with her diary. Joe laughed. Shaun

finished his breakfast, grabbed his school bag and ran.

‘See you at the show tonight,’ he called and the door slammed behind him.

Anna turned to Joe and pointed at him. ‘Call your father.’

‘OK, I’ll call my fazzer,’ he said. Her English was almost perfect, but ‘ths’ still got the better of her. She gave him a look.

‘You’re so exotic, Annabel,’ he said, lingering on the ‘l’. She gave him another look.

Sam Tallon stood in the service room on the second level of the lighthouse, shaking his head. He was a short man with a doughy chubbiness.

‘My God, this brings back memories,’ he said. ‘The keeper would be sitting at this desk, filling out his reports . . .’ He stopped and pointed. ‘You’ll have to get a scraper to the paint on the treads of that ladder.’ Sam was Anna’s restoration expert, a former engineer with the Commissioners of Irish Lights. He was sixty-eight years old and she had just made him walk up a narrow spiral staircase.

‘Right,’ he said and grabbed on, heaving himself up the rungs of a second ladder, then pushing through a cast iron trap door into the lantern house. His laugh echoed down to her. When she climbed up, he let out a whistle.

‘You’ve got a job on your hands here.’

'I thought so,' said Anna, looking around at the cracked, rusty walls.

'You'll have to strip that right back,' said Sam. 'There's layers and layers of enamel there. It'll be rock hard.'

At the centre of the room was a pedestal holding a vat of mercury that supported the five-ton weight of the lighthouse lens. Only its base could be seen from the lantern house – most of it filled the gallery above. Sam checked the gauge at the side of the vat.

'Well, the mercury level has dropped a small bit. So the rollers underneath the lens are probably taking a little more weight than they're supposed to. But it's not a big problem, especially if the light's not going to be on all the time.'

'I'm just hoping I'll be able to light it at all.'

'Ah, you should be fine,' said Sam. 'I'd say they'll make you agree to light it only at a certain time and to have the beam travel inland.'

Anna held her breath as Sam studied the base of the lens, checking the clockwork mechanism that rotated it.

'I don't believe it,' said Sam eventually. 'I think it's all right. After nearly forty years. We'll need to get the weights moving, but I think you're in luck.'

'Thank God,' said Anna.

'A mantle, like the wick of a candle, burns inside that,' he said, back to the lens. 'If you didn't

have a mantle, there'd be no light. And it's only a little silk thing you could fit in your pocket.' He chuckled. 'Anyway, the prisms in the lens refract the light, the lens rotates and there you have your lovely lighthouse beam.' Sam climbed the ladder inside the lens, breaking cobwebs as he went.

'It's filthy,' he said. 'You'll have to get at this later, probably after you strip the walls. And you'll need to get your hands on some new mantles, by the way – 55mm.'

They moved back down through the lighthouse and out through the old doors.

'You'll need to replace them too,' said Sam.

'They're on their way,' said Anna. He was impressed.

'Now, what I'll do,' said Sam, 'is clean the rollers and check the pressure in the kerosene pumps. I'll leave you to clean the lens and the brass.' He smiled.

'OK,' said Anna.

'Then we can give it a run-through, see if it's all still in working order,' said Sam.

'Maybe not right away,' she said. 'I'll let you know when's a good time.'

'No problem at all.'

The last ripples of conversation died and the audience turned to the stage. Haunting music filled the room. Katie Lawson stepped forward and began to sing. Shaun smiled. Here was his beautiful

girlfriend, stunning the audience into silence with the sweetest voice he'd ever heard. She had changed his life. He had come to Ireland reluctantly, miserably, desperately missing baseball, cable, twenty-four-hour everything. And then came Katie. On the first day in his new school, she was all he saw. She was bent forward on her desk, slapping it with her fist, bursting with her contagious, singsong laugh. Then she sat back, pushing her dark hair off her face and wiping tears from her eyes. Shaun's heart flipped as he walked towards her. She had the cutest smile and it lit up her whole face. She was all natural; glowing skin, fresh cheeks, sparkling brown eyes. Once they locked onto his, he was gone.

Katie left the stage to sit beside him, her head bowed, embarrassed by the applause.

'Wow,' Shaun whispered to her. 'You were amazing. You blew everyone away.'

Katie blushed. 'No, I didn't,' she said, shaking her head.

'Shut up,' said Shaun. 'You rocked.'

Ali Danaher, Katie's best friend, came next, with a poem she had written herself. Shaun was smiling before she even started because he knew it would be black and heavy, like her clothes and her eye shadow. Ali had dry bottle-blond hair and if she pulled her sleeves up too high, skinny razor marks on her arms – for effect. She never admitted she came from a happy comfortable home, because

her art would suffer. She finished the poem solemnly:

“. . . rotten core
Seeping through, finally breaking the ivory
surface
A tarnished history
No longer hidden, too late to hide.”

Shaun and Katie cheered over the parents' polite applause. Ed Danaher rolled his eyes at his wife, but was the last one to stop clapping.

When it was over, Shaun took Katie's hand and guided her through the hall.

Joe kissed Anna goodbye and left with Ed for Danaher's. She turned away, still smiling, and saw Petey Grant, the school caretaker, loping towards her. Petey had sallow skin and dark brown hair cut tight before it started to curl. Under thick eyebrows, his almond-shaped eyes were a soft blue and rarely made contact with anyone else's. When he spoke, he leaned to one side, holding his big hands in front of him, moving his slender fingers in and out as if he was about to catch or pass a basketball.

'Hello, Mrs Lucchesi. Nice to see you tonight. Did you enjoy the performance? I thought it was excellent. Katie is a lovely singer. She's also a pretty girl. I heard her practising the other day.'

He blushed. 'Is Mr Lucchesi here? I wouldn't mind dropping into his workshop tomorrow if that's OK. Is he doing anything tomorrow? I have a day off. I wouldn't mind helping him on that table he's making.'

Petey liked to reveal every thought that came into his head. He'd had learning difficulties since he was a child and the kids in school were split between those who gave him a hard time and those who defended him fiercely. Anna adored him. He was polite, enthusiastic, sensitive and charmingly innocent for a twenty-five-year-old. From early on, Petey had found a friend in Joe and someone who shared his interest in lighthouses. Although, for Petey, it was his specialist subject and the only thing he would talk about if he could get away with it. When Joe was working on furniture for the house, Petey would come in, lean back against the worktop and talk for hours about the history of Irish lighthouses.

'You're welcome at the house any time, Petey,' said Anna.

'Thanks very much, Mrs Lucchesi. That would be great.'

He hesitated, never knowing quite when a conversation was over.

The keys to Seascapes were heavy in Shaun's pocket. His job was to mow the lawns and carry out repairs at the holiday homes, but now it was

September and most of the houses were vacant. His plan was to slip away with Katie to one of them later that night. She had told her mother she was going to his house, he had told his he was going to hers. Martha Lawson was a tough woman to get around, but she trusted her daughter.

‘There seems to be a bit of a mix-up about tonight,’ said Martha as she approached the pair. ‘I was just talking to Mrs Lucchesi and she says you’re coming to our house.’

Shit thought Shaun.

‘I thought we were watching *Aliens* tonight,’ said Katie.

‘No,’ said Shaun. ‘Playstation at my house.’

‘Well, I’m leaving now, so I’ll give you a lift,’ said Martha.

‘Shit,’ Katie mouthed at Shaun.

Anna stayed for another two hours, tidying up after the performance with some of the other ‘sucker moms’ as Joe called them. It was midnight by the time she left. She walked along by the church, lost in her thoughts.

‘Well, if it isn’t the beautiful Anna.’ The tone was all wrong.

She held her breath, then turned around. She was stunned at how John Miller now looked. The glazed eyes, the mottled red face and the unsteady legs she could put down to drunkenness, but

everything else came as a shock: his hair, greying and greasy, his skin, puffy, his shirt straining across his stomach. He swayed in front of her.

'I know I look like shit,' he said, his arms outstretched.

'No, you don't,' Anna said quietly. 'Not at all.'

'Fuck off! You're French. You're fucking perfect.'

She didn't know what to say.

'So, it's Anna Lucheesy now or so I've heard. Very nice.'

'Lu-caze-y,' she said, trying to smile.

'So, you married your cop then? Lucky guy. Lucky, lucky guy.' He grinned. 'Any chance of a fuck?'

'Jesus Christ, John!' she said, looking around. 'What are you saying?'

'That I want a fuck.'

'And where is your wife?'

'Still in Australia. Kicked me out. Hah! Can you fucking believe it? I'm back here living with Mother. Psycho up on the hill. About to take over managing the orchard. The one thing I swore I'd never do.'

'I'm sorry, John.' She turned to walk away.

'You're a great girl. A gorgeous girl,' he called after her.

She kept walking. Her hands were shaking, her face burning.

Suddenly he was behind her again, grabbing

her, forcing her up against the wall, his breath smelling of onions and alcohol, his clothes reeking of fish. There was a shiny smear on his chin and crusty white corners to his mouth. She pushed his heaving drunkenness away.

‘John, go home and sober up.’

‘You were always a tough bitch, Anna . . . you little ride.’ She stared at him, searching his face, but she found no trace of the John she used to love.