

Gimme Shelter



ROB GITTINS

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The characters in this book are entirely fictional and are not intended to bear any resemblance to anyone living or dead.

First impression: 2013

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The publishers wish to acknowledge the support of
Cyngor Llyfrau Cymru

Cover design: Matthew Tyson

Paperback ISBN: 978 0 95601 258 6

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 84771 762 7



Published and printed in Wales
on paper from well maintained forests by
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PROLOGUE

NIGHTMARES ARE SUPPOSED to end. This one didn't.

It all started in such an ordinary way. She was walking down the path that led from the rear of her home. The sun was shining, traffic could be heard from the nearby streets as could the distant sound of children playing in the park. Everything seemed so normal, so everyday.

As she reached the front of the house she looked sideways at their small front garden, then stopped. If she had not, then she'd have fallen to her certain death because the front garden wasn't there. Nothing was. There was a gaping chasm where once there'd been solid ground.

What looked like the sea thrashed at the bottom of that deep chasm and – a detail that still particularly terrified her for some reason – drainage pipes bucked to and fro in the raging water, surfacing, then sinking, before surfacing again. She stood there, unable to take a step back, knowing it was also impossible to take a step forward, suspended in some sort of purgatory and – unlike most nightmares when they reached this most terrifying of points – she didn't immediately wake from it.

That's what she also remembered and all-too keenly. Once a nightmare peaked like that it was normally the moment the sleeper would awake. But she knew she'd remained staring down at the chasm that had suddenly opened before her, at that raging water and those thrashing pipes, for what seemed like an eternity.

Now it was back. That same nightmare and she was in the middle of it and she knew what she was going to see but she couldn't do anything about it, couldn't even turn back because

there was nothing behind her, only a blackness even more terrifying somehow than all that lay ahead.

But there was a twist as there was always – now – a twist. She looked down again at the chasm that was waiting to swallow her, to see faces there now too. She couldn't see their bodies, they were submerged, but the faces were looking up at her, beseeching her for help; the faces of adults, of children, of terrified infants, all staring at her, appealing to her to do something.

Some of the faces she recognised. Some indeed were all-too familiar. Some would always be with her. But there were other faces too, the faces of people she'd never seen although they were connected to her as surely as if they were tied by some kind of eternal, invisible, umbilical cord.

The faces of those who should have been there.

The lost offspring of faces she'd previously failed to keep safe.

ELSHA HADN'T EXACTLY approved of what she'd termed the whirlwind romance and wedding although, as her daughter had pointed out, it was hardly that. Divone, better known to all in the family as Di, had known the man who was now her husband for the best part of a year. This hadn't been some drink or drug-fuelled impulse on a wild night out in Vegas.

They'd met, they'd talked, shared meals, done everything Elsha herself had done all those years earlier with Di's father. But all that had been in the company of both their families of course. She'd met his parents fairly early on in their relationship, he'd done the same.

Seminal moments.

Rites of passage.

The rites denied to her, somewhat typically, by her middle daughter.

Moments missed.

Elsha opened the fridge, checked the well-stocked shelves for roughly the fifteenth time in as many minutes. With the exception of a couple of ingredients for the salad dressing, ingredients Di herself had volunteered to fetch from the local convenience store – which doubled as a garage and which trebled as a post office – everything was in place for the family meal that evening; the meal where they'd finally get to know a man who was already part of their family.

First impressions, she had to concede, had been favourable. All right, there had only been a fleeting introduction as he dropped Di off on his way from the airport to some meeting

he had to attend. But his handshake seemed strong and manly, his smile warm and genuine as were the quick kisses he'd exchanged, Continental-style, first with Di's sister, Braith and then with Cara, their youngest, not yet five years old but clearly not immune, even at that age, to male attention if the pleased flush that had illuminated her face was anything to go by.

There was still Di's father, Macklyn, to contend with. Emmanuel wouldn't be able to win him over with a simple handshake and a warm and seemingly genuine smile. Macklyn had spent the best part of thirty years assessing people in his line of work and Emmanuel was going to be well and truly assessed and in some forensic detail later on.

Macklyn certainly wouldn't be influenced by the one other factor about Emmanuel that was also immediately obvious to Elsha, to Braith and even to the young Cara; that Di's new husband, Elsha's new son-in-law and Braith and Cara's new brother-in-law, was definitely and undeniably hot.

Elsha smiled as she closed the fridge, listened to the delighted peals of laughter from Cara as she tried on some make-up upstairs, heard drawers opening and closing and cupboard doors banging as she and Braith also tried on a succession of clothes, the two girls already preparing themselves for the evening ahead. Di may have bagged something of a prize in the shape of an exotic beau from some distant land across the sea, but clearly neither Braith nor Cara intended to be put in the shade by their newly-arrived sibling. Tonight, everyone intended to look their best.

Elsha ducked slightly, an instinctive reaction perhaps, checked her own hair in the polished glass-like surface of the chest-high oven, then turned as a ring sounded on the doorbell outside.

For a moment some small shadow appeared on the very edge of her vision, a trick of the light most probably, the sun going behind a passing cloud perhaps.

But later, much later, she'd replay that moment, pore over it obsessively, wondering if it had been something else, some instinct stirring, punishing herself with the same question again and again; what would have happened had she acted on it?

Braith was already moving down the hall, Cara clattering down the stairs behind her. All she could hear were the same words chanted by them both as they headed for the door – 'Ditzy' – 'Ditzy Di'.

'Ditzy Di' was the family nickname for the middle daughter who was perennially forgetful; scatterbrained to use another well-worn family phrase. How many times could Elsha remember them turning back as they set off on some family outing and Di would suddenly remember she hadn't brought along some book, some crayons, a favourite soft toy?

Braith and Cara were placing bets as they made for the door, trying to second-guess what it was that had brought her back this time. She'd already returned twice, the first time for her purse, the second for her phone. A giggling Cara was placing her bet on shoes but Braith doubted even Di could have walked out of the door without footwear.

Was it again some instinct at work? For a moment Elsha held her breath, almost as if she knew that she wanted to preserve those moments, those simple ordinary family snapshots, freeze them in time somehow, freeze her daughters in that same moment, keep them as they were right there and then, suspended in that instant forever.

A second later she heard it. It was as if a clap of thunder had sounded outside, which was impossible she knew, but what else could it be? How else to explain the deafening explosion that suddenly seemed to blast through the house?

But as she looked towards the window she could see that the sun was shining as brightly as it had done just a moment earlier

and even the slight shadow she'd sensed previously seemed now to have lifted.

Everything looked exactly the same, but it wasn't.

She knew, in that instant, that everything had changed forever.

Cara was a few feet behind her sister. It had become a race as to who would reach the door first, who'd be the first to taunt Di with her nickname.

Braith won the race. Later, Cara would wonder whether it would have made any difference, whether what happened a moment later wouldn't have happened at all if a little girl had opened the door as opposed to her grown-up sister.

A man stared back at Braith, a man who looked quite ordinary. Certainly Cara could recall no particular distinguishing features in the days and months that followed. She'd be asked the same questions over and over again; how old was he, what was the colour of his hair, how tall was he, was he muscular like her father or thin like their next-door neighbour and Cara tried to answer all their questions as honestly as she could but it was difficult when all she could think of was the gun in his hand.

As Cara stared down the hall it was all she could focus on. Everything else seemed to melt into the background.

Braith would have been of more use to the subsequent inquiry. In the single second before a blinding white light seemed to bleach the whole world, bleeding all colour from everything before her, she looked straight into the man's eyes. Braith didn't look at the gun at all. All she saw was his eyes staring at her, pausing just a moment as he seemed to check her features.

Then he gave the slightest nod, seemingly satisfied now.

Then the nozzle of the gun kicked upwards and Braith, acting

on some compulsion to protect her younger sister, moved to shield Cara who was hovering just a few feet behind.

As she half-turned, the bullet exploded from the short barrel of the gun, smashing into her face, her brains exploding out of the back of her skull. Braith was propelled back by the impact, arms flailing, her body instinctively attempting to break the fall, to protect what had already been destroyed.

Cara looked down at her sister, only the face that stared back at her belonged to no-one she now recognised. In fact it didn't even seem to belong to a human being at all. The nose and eyes had been replaced by what looked to be a second mouth which was not a mouth at all of course, but a large and gaping wound inside which everything seemed to be dancing; veins, bits of skin tissue, bones.

And coursing through it all, spewing out from that second, open, mouth was blood, running down over her neck, staining the dress Braith had picked out for the party that night.

Cara looked up and saw the man still standing in the doorway, not even seeming to see the young girl, the man checking now, making sure, but there could be little doubt. The face that had once belonged to her sister had been totally destroyed, bits of her brain were staining the stairs and while her body might still be twitching, horribly, she had to be dead. How could she not be, how could anyone survive something like that?

Then the gunman was gone. Cara looked down at Braith who'd now rolled onto her side. Cara turned, the will to survive kicking in perhaps, the little girl knowing she had to get away.

Which was when she saw another figure appear in the doorway behind her. She didn't hold a gun but she was still a stranger, which was the second totally bewildering realisation in almost as many seconds because how could her mother suddenly appear to be a stranger? It didn't make sense, but she did.

For that moment it was like looking at some caricature of a woman Cara had once known as her mother as Elsha looked down the hallway at the twitching body of her eldest daughter and at parts of her brain now beginning to slide, snail-like, down the wallpaper leading up to the first-floor landing.

For that moment too there was silence, but that didn't last. Then her mother started to scream.

THE CORRIDOR WAS grimy. Generations of handprints stained the walls, paint peeled from the cracked ceiling, old scene-of-crime posters peeked out from behind new, destined themselves to be plastered over in turn.

Ros looked up as a hand came into view. She focused briefly as Conor, some two years her junior and recently seconded from this very unit, handed her a cup of foul-smelling coffee in a stained mug. The crest of Cardiff City Football Club, a local favourite, the ground just a few miles away, was wrapped round the side. Someone had tried to scratch something on it, presumably derogatory, but the enamel had defeated the attempt and all that remained were splinters and scratches.

Ros looked round. This place always had been fiercely territorial and that wasn't just in its choice of football teams. As far as this place was concerned, you were either in or you were out. You were part of the team or you were the opposition even if, technically, everyone was supposed to be on the same side.

Us against them.

The world out there against everyone in here.

There was an unspoken justification for that which Ros sensed every time she paid one of her largely-unwelcome visits. Murder Squad had always dealt with human depravity in its most extreme forms. Those sorts of experiences forged a special type of team spirit, bonded fellow officers in a way few other crimes could.

Or twisted the spirit of everyone who ever passed through these doors, corrupting anything resembling a normal

world-view and forever guaranteeing that everyone in here would look at a world out there with eyes that had not only seen the worst but now expected the worst – and not just from those they called by all manner of names but who, in Ros's department, were still called clients.

No wonder the divorce rate in this department was twice the average for the whole of the force and that, given the statistics for marital disintegration in policing, was saying something.

'The machine was bust, I popped into the kitchen.'

Conor nodded at the mug in Ros's hand.

'Not the Swans are you, Ma'am?'

Ros wasn't even listening. She didn't even register the deliberate hesitation before the final address, the habitual mark of respect that was anything but.

She knew what Conor was saying. I know this place. I know my way around, I know what to do when a vending machine gives up the ghost, vandalised in all probability by one of the low-life villains I used to nick.

Because this used to be my world. A world where real police officers do real policing, not the glorified babysitting I'm now doing thanks to some procedural screw-up Ros hadn't even bothered investigating too deeply because she knew she'd only be told half the truth anyway.

It didn't matter where Conor used to work. He was an extra body, an extra pair of eyes and an extra pair of hands and for now that was all that mattered.

Then Ros looked up as, from inside a nearby room, she heard voices raised in volume; one voice in particular – a female voice – sounding louder than the rest.

Conor hadn't exactly enjoyed too much in the way of conversation from his new DS on the way over to his old stomping ground. From the little he'd been able to glean since

his recent arrival, no-one did get too much in the way of idle chit-chat from her. Conor had met some strange individuals in his time in Murder Squad but there was still something unsettling about Ros. She was a cold fish, he'd been warned of that, but there was something else going on inside her too.

Anyway, being cold at heart didn't really square with the demands of the unit she'd elected to join immediately after her initial training. That unit – Witness Protection – now his unit too, had traditionally been seen as little more than a support service, staffed by jumped-up care assistants who, more often than not, wore their bleeding hearts on their sleeves.

Did Ros even have a heart? There was precious little evidence of that either. She lived alone, didn't mix with anyone from the department socially, was occasionally seen in the company of some male or other in one of the local bars or restaurants so that answered one question, the dyke angle at least; but that aside there was literally nothing to report.

Perhaps because there was nothing. Perhaps because she was an open book, a loser, an inadequate, a twenty-something woman who couldn't cut it in either normal policing or normal life, who'd elected to spend her life in this backwater, picking up the pieces after everyone else, mopping up the mess.

Conor didn't even hear the raised voices from inside the nearby room. He was used to it. He just looked round at a place that was now his past. Then he looked back at Ros, hoping – as fervently as he'd ever hoped for anything in his life – that he wasn't looking at his future too.

'Looked like vandals at first, guv.'

Half an hour earlier, Donovan Banks, late twenties, still single, no significant other as yet, had kept step along the stained corridor with Kayne Masters, early forties, marital status unknown, at least so far as Banks was concerned.

‘A neighbour had called the fire boys. Said there was smoke coming out of this disused shop down the street.’

‘What sort of shop?’

‘Butcher’s.’

Masters nodded, grimly. It seemed to fit.

Masters and Banks barely paused as another officer, Keiran Scott, a contemporary of Banks, part of the same year’s intake, handed his current senior officer a mug of coffee before handing Masters his usual mug of tea, strong, just a dash of milk.

Masters did proffer Scott the courtesy of a nod by way of thanks but Banks had other priorities on his mind right now and delighted in letting Scott know that by hardly even seeming to see him.

‘There was a storage room in the back. It still had some of the old hooks in the ceiling. There wasn’t anything else in there apart from an old chair, not an office chair but an armchair, great big thing it must have been too. That’s what had been set alight.’

Banks paused.

‘Then they realised there was something else in there too.’

Masters moved ahead of Banks into the interview room, seated himself on a hard chair, Banks taking the seat next to him. Opposite was Tyra Rhea, early twenties, slim, mixed-race – although what races had been mixed to create that stunning face Masters couldn’t decide. Her face, currently framed by a shock of dyed blue hair, had been her passport to what must have seemed like heaven to a girl in her late teens but which now, just a few years later, looked as if it had been a one-way ticket to some particularly twisted version of hell.

And that’s what interested Masters rather more at present.

What particular hell had she witnessed in that old storage room in that disused butcher’s shop?

What demons and ogres had she kept company with in there?

And what sort of deal could they now do to make sure those demons and ogres – whatever and whoever they were – would never visit on anyone else the horror they'd inflicted that day?

'I want a smoke.'

'Not possible.'

Tyra hadn't even looked at Banks as he answered her. She'd clearly already developed a sixth sense for those who held the real reins of power.

Masters reached in his pocket and, in strict contravention of procedure and good practice, pushed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter across the desk to the young woman. It wouldn't be the first breach of protocol or the last.

Tyra lit a cigarette, inhaled, then exhaled a cloud of smoke that enveloped Banks as he leant forward to check the interview tape was working.

Tyra eyed him coolly for a moment.

Then she'd begun.

'He'd started getting whispers a year or so ago. This new face had opened up somewhere close by. There were a couple of adverts in some of the free sheets, girls wanted for escort work, that kind of thing.'

Masters studied the young girl before him. Her age must have been one of her biggest attractions for her new boyfriend. She would have been useful. New girls arriving in a city, any city – London, Nottingham, Manchester or in their case the melting pot of old and new, race and creed, that was modern-day Cardiff – were always going to gravitate towards someone like her, towards one of their own. Or at least a girl who appeared to be one of their own rather than the overweight Ukrainian that Tyra had been living with for the last six months.

But all roads still led back to the Ukrainian – Yaroslav – in the end.

‘It wasn’t that big a problem, at least not at the start. It’s not as if he expected any kind of monopoly or nothing. And it’s not as if there’s not enough business to go round either, let’s face it, you lot and sex.’

Tyra nodded at the middle-aged copper and his youthful companion, seeing one thing and one thing only; inexhaustible demand for which her boyfriend promised limitless supply.

‘So what changed?’

Tyra paused and Masters could understand why. Even at this late stage in what had already been quite a journey, all this was clearly still something of a trial to her. She’d never in her wildest imaginings dreamt she’d be sitting on one side of a police interview desk, of her own volition, volunteering chapter and verse on the activities of a man she’d seen as a boyfriend and protector, possibly for years to come.

But what had happened in that butcher’s shop had scared her badly – as the slight shake of her hand as she raised her half-finished cigarette to her mouth attested.

‘A couple of our girls went over. The usual thing, they reckoned they could get a better deal with someone else, maybe got tired of their regulars, I don’t know, I never get involved in that sort of stuff myself.’

Banks nodded, sour.

‘Just open the door for others.’

‘Who’s he, Snow White?’

Masters stepped in, defusing the sudden tension, diverting her hostile stare and raised voice away from the younger officer and his somewhat ill-timed intervention.

‘One of his girls is now with us.’

‘Kirino.’

Tyra nodded.

'I know.'

'And Yaroslav knows too?'

'Of course he knows.'

'And?'

'And what do you think? He's spitting fucking blood.'

Tyra paused.

'That's one of the reasons for what happened. He never said nothing, he wouldn't, he's never exactly been the confiding type but I reckon he started to feel things were slipping out of his control. New face on the manor. Then an old face suddenly switches sides and starts talking to you.'

Tyra shrugged.

'It upset him.'

Masters reviewed the mental arithmetic.

Yaroslav's office housed twelve landlines all with different numbers. A small workforce manned the phones answering each with the name of a different agency: Studio 7, Best Choice, 18 & New. To service the twelve landlines Yaroslav had more than a hundred and twenty women on his books, all ages, shapes, sizes and nationalities. He saw himself as a one-stop shop. No need to go anywhere else, whatever your preference, Yaroslav always had the product and that product didn't now just service the capital city which had become its base. Yaroslav's sphere of influence and operation was expanding almost daily.

The minimum outcall charge was £200, often more once travelling and optional extras such as uniforms and specialist services were added on. The clients paid Yaroslav, he paid half to the girls on what he called the platinum band, the highest; followed by a third to girls on the gold band and a quarter to those starting out who were placed on the trainee tier or 'his new angels' as he sometimes referred to them.

Out of that little lot Masters estimated that the Ukrainian raked in somewhere in the region of a million, maybe a million

and a half per year. Throw in various associated activities such as sex-trafficking and drug distribution, often using those very same girls and that same clientele and that figure had to be doubled, if not trebled.

No wonder, to paraphrase the young woman sitting opposite right now, Yaroslav had become a little upset.

‘Then this girl came over to us. It had been pretty well one-way traffic up to then, but it seemed this new face was getting greedy.’

‘Wojike.’

Banks had broken in again.

‘That was his name. Wojike.’

Tyra didn’t reply, just exhaled again, the smoke curling till it hit the ceiling where it vapourised.

‘The girl had gone on an all-nighter. Some art critic or somebody, he was supposed to be really well-known. He paid her two grand to sit and have dinner with him in some fancy restaurant somewhere down in the bay, then go back to his place. They agreed on the money up front. The punter paid by credit card, all usual enough.’

Tyra paused.

‘This girl was a bit out of the ordinary too. Name was Alison something and she was temporary and yeah, I know they all say that but she was different. She’d been in Uni, had run up a few debts, the usual, drugs and stuff, didn’t want to go back to Surrey and explain all that to Daddy and Mummy so she’d decided to turn a few tricks, pay it off that way, then get out. She probably would have done too, she had her head screwed on.’

Tyra paused again.

‘Not that it stopped her getting right royally screwed over by –.’

Tyra inclined her head towards Banks. She was now in charge of this story and was well and truly calling all the shots too.

Banks hesitated, but Masters was now looking at him too.

‘Wojike.’

Tyra nodded, then ground out her cigarette on the interview table, flicked the dead stub on the floor.

‘The next morning, Wojike tells her there’s been a problem with the card. The transaction didn’t go through. Leave it to him, he’ll get on the case, come back to her. He does a day or so later, tells her the bloke had got himself maxed out, what can he do, he can’t exactly go to the police, looks like they’ll have to write it off, he’s as upset as she is about this, he’s down a grand himself but that’s what happens sometimes.’

Tyra shrugged.

‘Hadn’t happened at all of course and she knew it. A couple of the other girls had been done over in the same way on the really big jobs. They didn’t compare notes, he made sure they had next to no contact with each other, but he did use the same drivers to get them to the marks. The girls talked to the drivers, the drivers told the girls what some of the others had said, it didn’t take long for them to get the full SP.’

Tyra paused.

‘Yaroslav decides this was his chance. OK, he’d scored himself a nice little meal ticket with Alison thanks to this Wojike getting greedy, but he wanted more. What he was doing was giving them all a bad name, girls were getting suspicious, punters were beginning to get a bit antsy too because the girls were starting to ask all sorts of awkward questions, so he decided to teach this new man on the manor a bit of a lesson.’

Tyra paused, let the last word hang in the air much as her cigarette smoke a few moments earlier.

‘Yaroslav gets Alison to call him. She tells him she’s tried going solo but it’s not working out. Maybe she was a bit hasty walking out on him like that. Maybe they could talk about things. And

Wojjike, he's delighted. He'd heard whispers that she'd gone over to some other outfit, so maybe he wasn't only going to get one of his star performers back, maybe he's going to get some tasty little info about one of his main rivals too. So when she says can they meet, he's only too willing.'

'And they met in a disused butcher's shop?'

Tyra looked at Masters for a moment, hesitated. Suddenly she wasn't in that room, sitting at that interview table, talking to two cops. She was in a place she never wanted to be again, seeing sights she never wanted to witness, sights she'd never eradicate from behind her eyes no matter how hard she tried.

'Yaroslav used this cheap hotel, out on the link road heading over towards Newport. Alison told Wojjike that's where she'd been staying while she tried to set up by herself, he could meet her there. Yaroslav and a couple of his faces were waiting in the bathroom. It was all over in a second or two. He came in, Yaroslav stuck a taser in his balls, pulled the trigger.'

Across the table, Banks tensed instinctively.

'I'd seen him pull the same trick before. Sometimes, if they're lucky, they pass out, sometimes they just go into some sort of shock, whatever, they're never exactly in any sort of state to do much about it. Yaroslav bundled him into a laundry cart they'd found at the end of one of the corridors, wheeled him out and drove him round to the shop. By the time he came round he was tied to this armchair they'd found in a skip round the back.'

Tyra paused.

'By then he was naked too. Legs apart, crown jewels on show. Arms tied behind his back.'

Tyra paused again.

'Me and Yaroslav had watched this film once. It was all about this bloke who'd gone up against some gang or other. He wasted pretty well all of them but he kept one alive. He'd picked him

out right from the start, made sure he saw the lot, watched as every one of his friends and family got taken out, the girls raped, the men tortured, as if he was saving him for last, as if there was something really tasty in store for this one. When it came to his turn he was last man standing, only he couldn't stand by then, couldn't sit either, it was like someone had taken out his spine or something, he just flopped all over the place, like he was made out of jelly.'

Tyra continued, images from the film now flashing before her eyes.

'But then he let him go. Didn't touch a hair on his head, just told him to get out. That way he could tell everyone of course. He could tell everyone what had happened which was always going to be a lot better than relying on a few dead bodies to do it instead.'

Masters kept his face impassive. From the scene of crime report he had a pretty shrewd idea what was coming next, but that didn't mean he actually wanted to hear it. In the scales of justice stakes, what had been meted out to Wojike was undeniably harsh but not anything anyone was going to lose too much sleep over.

What also happened in that room was something else entirely.

'They'd brought that Alison along too. She didn't want to come, she'd done what she was supposed to do, what was the point, but she didn't know the half of it, did she?'

Tyra paused again.

And all of a sudden she looked scared.

'No-one knew what he had in mind. Maybe he didn't have it in mind, maybe something happened inside that weird head of his once he got in the room, I don't know. All I do know is now it wasn't Wojike he was looking at all of a sudden, now it was the posh bit, only doing it to clear the student loan before moving

back to Surrey, say hello to her horse, marry a solicitor, only she wasn't going to be doing that in a hurry was she, not unless she met a seriously twisted brief who got off on freaks.'

She was talking too much and she knew it and so did Masters. Maybe it was some kind of defence mechanism but they usually did one or the other; babbled away ten to the dozen or retreated into a silence so complete it was catatonic.

'We didn't even know he had it with him. He hardly needed it let's face it, a knife, a shooter OK, cut him up a bit, stick the shooter in his gob, threaten to pull the trigger, even pull the fucking trigger if he wanted, wouldn't be the first from everything I'd heard, probably wouldn't be the last neither, but that was his business.'

She was doing it again, trying to fill the space inside her head that was currently filled with everything that was venal and evil.

Tyra took another deep breath, regained some sort of control.

'She thought it was water at first. Couldn't work out why he'd suddenly emptied a whole bottle of water all over her head mind you, but maybe it was some sort of game or something. There was about a second or two when she looked at me, when the rest of us looked back at her and thought, what the fuck? Even Wojike was staring at her now too and with everything else he had on his mind right now that really was something.'

Tyra paused again.

'After a second or two we saw this smoke coming off her head. She had really thick hair, tied up in a sort of bob so it must have taken that amount of time to start eating its way through it all. But once it reached her scalp, it must have reacted or something, I don't know, I'm not any sort of chemist or nothing, don't want to be neither, I don't want to

be anywhere near any of that stuff ever again, not after seeing what it did.’

Outside, in the corridor, a silent Ros was reading the case notes at the same time.

Yaroslav had emptied a two-litre bottle of acid over the young girl’s scalp. There was nothing particularly exotic in the choice of acid, just the usual sulphuric variety you could find in any common or garden industrial laboratory or chemical store, even a school classroom. Easy to acquire, devastating in its impact and the really clever part, for the likes of Yaroslav at least, was the high survival rate among the victims of those sorts of attacks.

Sure, that victim’s going to need an intensive period of corrective surgery, reconstruction of the gullet where they’ve most likely inhaled or even drunk some of the poison not to mention dozens, if not hundreds, of skin grafts but the body keeps going even when the brain is willing it to close down, to give up, to stop fighting the unendurable agony that’s going on seemingly forever. The organs can still function; and do.

So the victim becomes one of the living dead, as Alison, even at this early stage of what was being euphemistically called her recovery, was already discovering by all accounts.

Ros looked up, stared down the corridor, taking in nothing, seeing only a face distorted into a silent scream, a living testament to the evil one human being can do to another.

Back in the interview room, Tyra was now hunched forward over the table, staring at the tape.

‘She reached out, screaming, holding out her arms and he took hold of them, but that was just to stop her holding them over her face and now her eyes were smoking too and her eyeballs, it was like they were melting or something, all this white and yellow stuff was coming out but he just dragged her over to Wojike who

was staring at her like we all were and now she couldn't even scream no more, now it was like she was trying, but nothing was coming out or maybe the stuff had already got into her mouth, was already starting to burn away her voice.'

Banks checked the tape, a reflex action, but in reality he was looking away from all this, turning away from everything he was hearing, from the involuntary images now forcing their way into his head.

Masters just stared at her, betraying nothing, knowing how close she was to giving way right now, how even the slightest sign of weakness on his part would probably be enough to make her crack, how young she was despite everything she'd done, how thin the veneer she hid behind.

Masters also knew she'd tell this story once and once only – the true story anyway in its each and every detail – and he knew it was a story she'd been wanting to tell for days as if somehow she might purge herself of it all, release it in some great cathartic outpouring that would rid her of it forever. But once she'd told the story, once she realised it could never be purged, once she'd understood the futility of the confessional, she'd lose interest, would retreat. So they had to get this story, here and now, get it committed to record, preserved.

Tyra paused and Masters allowed his concentration to wander just for a moment, his mind's eye flickering briefly over the figure he'd seen waiting in the corridor as they'd arrived, the figure who would now play as large a part as anyone in the eventual success or otherwise of the court case to come.

Ros Gilet. The surname wasn't pronounced like the well-known razor, the last 't' was silent apparently. Which, in a curious way, complemented the woman herself. She was one of the best in the business in delivering witnesses in one piece and in something approximating the right state of mind to the witness box.

His ever-present niggle was his complete inability to even begin to get to know her despite at least six years of liaising on at least five times that number of cases. Ros was a closed book to Masters. So much of her remained hidden, silent indeed; and Masters didn't like that. In his line of work he liked everything out in the open. Maybe that was an occupational hazard. Maybe it was something else.

Tyra started again.

'Yaroslav didn't even seem to see her. He was just holding her in front of Wojike, pushing her face as close as he could to his, even pushing her face into his so part of his cheek started to smoke where the acid touched him, but then he held her back because he didn't want him damaged, not yet, not like that anyway, he didn't want his eyes burning out or nothing, he wanted him to see everything that was going to happen to him because what he'd done so far, that was just the start.'

Tyra took a quick, deep breath.

'He took the girl back towards the door, the rear one that led onto an alleyway and the yard. And just pushed her out. He didn't bother doing anything else with her, what was the point, she couldn't see as it was, couldn't even speak. But he wanted her to be seen and he wanted her to be taken into hospital because he knew that way she might recover. It might take weeks, might take months, but then the crazy fuck would have done what that bloke in the movie did, he was going to have her telling people what had happened to her, what he'd done and he wanted that story to go round, he wanted everyone to hear it, everyone who mattered anyway so then everyone'd know what happened to girls who work for someone else and as for you lot getting involved - '

Tyra shot Masters and Banks a contemptuous glance.

'Don't even think about it. If he could do something like that to some kid who'd hardly even crossed him what

the fuck could he do to someone who seriously pissed him off?’

Tyra paused again.

‘So. That was the warm-up and I really didn’t fancy hanging round for the rest and even the two goons Yaroslav had brought along with him were looking a bit wary now. They weren’t the sharpest tools in the box but even they could work out we were going to be in for something extra-special tasty and as for Wojike, he was just staring at him almost like he’d gone beyond fear, like his head was somewhere else completely.’

Tyra unscrewed the top off one of the bottles of water that had been provided for the interview but didn’t drink. She just stared at the opened bottle for a moment, then everything came out again in another great rush.

‘Yaroslav went for his balls first. He must still have been in agony from the taser or thought he was, but he didn’t know what agony was, did he? Not till he felt the acid eating into them, dissolving them I suppose and it was like with Alison, the screams that were coming out of his gob were so high-pitched you couldn’t hear them. Then Yaroslav yanked his head back and I thought he was going to do what he did with the girl, that he was going for the hair but he wasn’t, not yet. He opened his mouth first instead, poured some of the acid inside and now Wojike was trying to breathe out, trying his hardest not to swallow, not to take any of it in and all you could see was something that looked like flames coming out from behind his teeth, like he was a fire-eater in a circus or something. Then Yaroslav went for his ears and we all just stood there watching while they melted, shrivelling like they were pieces of bacon, all the folds of skin collapsing in on themselves. And I think Yaroslav knew the end was coming now because Wojike’s skin had gone all clammy and you could almost see his heart coming out of his ribcage it was hammering away so much.’

Tyra paused once more.

‘So then he yanked his head back one last time, stuck his finger into his eyeball, under his eyelid so he was staring straight up at him, couldn’t blink, couldn’t do nothing and then he started dripping acid into his eyes, one drop at a time, he even splashed his own fingers with some of the stuff but he didn’t care, probably thought it was good PR, every time he shook someone’s hand from then on it was going to be there, his hand, all scarred and if they’d heard the story about how he’d got them scars they could see straightaway it was true and if they hadn’t he could hold his hands out in front of their face and tell them.’

Banks reached out and took one of the bottles of water. He needed a drink now even if Tyra didn’t.

‘One of the goons had already been sick in the corner. Yaroslav didn’t even seem to see him, didn’t even seem to realise any of us were still in the same room. I made for the door, I couldn’t take any more, this wasn’t a lesson like he’d meted out before, this was something else. I started to open it when I felt his hand on my shoulder. He spun me round and for a moment I thought I was going to get the same treatment as the posh bit, he was that far gone, his eyes were looking at me but I didn’t know who he was seeing.’

Tyra stood up and for a moment Banks thought the interview was done, that all she’d just re-lived had proved too much and relief washed over him that it was over, at least for now. But it wasn’t.

Masters didn’t move, just kept staring as impassively as he was able as Tyra turned, lifted up her T-shirt, revealed her naked back adorned by a single crude cross burnt into the skin by a finger dipped in burning acid.

Tyra had been branded. A mark scored into her skin. As if she was cattle, something to be traded, bought and sold.

Meaning another lesson had been meted out in the old storage room of that disused butcher's shop.

Another signal dispatched.