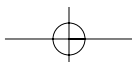
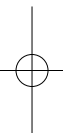
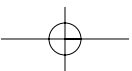
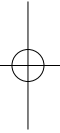
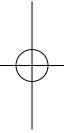




LETHAL PROFIT





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ALEX BLACKMORE



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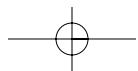
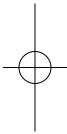
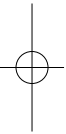
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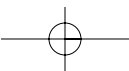
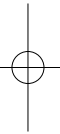
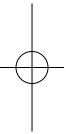
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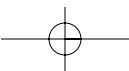
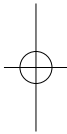
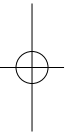


For Mum, Dad, Pippa and B





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ONE

THE LIGHT IN THE BAR WAS dim; the plush velvet of the seating and the garish gold leaf of the furnishings had all begun to meld into one. Eva tightened her grip around the base of her champagne glass as if it might sober her up. She looked along the small stretch of dark oak wood bar between her and the man sitting opposite her.

He met her gaze as he continued to speak. For a second Eva thought she had seen something in those deep blue pools that sent a shiver down her spine. Something predatory and cold. He blinked, his eyes cleared and the feeling left her.

I should go back to my hotel, Eva thought to herself. But the idea of the bleak, cold room near the Gare du Nord was nowhere near as attractive as this seductive, warm hotel bar where the waiters scrambled to pop the cork on another bottle of Bollinger each time March produced his card.

She straightened up on her stool and forced herself to ask a question. March had been speaking for what seemed like hours – he always had liked the sound of his own voice. He and her brother Jackson had been friends at school before Jackson disappeared suddenly, aged 18. In the eleven years since then March – a nickname, his surname was ‘Marchment’ – had stopped dressing like his father and punctuating all his sentences with ‘like’, and apparently developed quite a thing for a Tom Ford suit.

‘You look tired,’ he was saying as Eva felt herself sway slightly on the bar stool. She stared at his expensive jacket as

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something metallic on his breast pocket caught her eye. Looking closer she saw it was a small acorn. She looked away when she realised he was waiting for a response.

‘Yeah, it’s been a long, unproductive day.’

‘Have you been able to speak to any of Jackson’s friends?’

‘No.’ She sighed. ‘I’ve been in Paris a week now and all I’ve really managed to do is track down someone Jackson apparently spent five minutes with before he dropped off the radar.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Shaun Thompson.’

‘It’s a start.’

‘I’m trying to look at it that way but I can’t imagine he’s going to be much help. He shared a cigarette with Jackson just before he disappeared but I don’t think they even exchanged names.’

‘Did the police not tell you much about Jackson’s death?’

‘They did and they didn’t. I’ve seen a summary police report but it’s not exactly detailed – it could be about anyone.’

‘Non-specific?’

‘Puzzlingly so. I know that Jackson and I weren’t that close any more – after he went missing at school we all thought he was dead. I spent an entire decade believing that. It was...’ She hesitated. ‘... *difficult* when he suddenly appeared again.’ Eva forced the words out. She didn’t find it easy to talk about.

‘But in that year after he was suddenly there again, I felt like he was happy here in Paris. He was working for that aid agency, he had friends, a pretty girlfriend, lots to live for. Why would he...’

Eva’s voice trailed away.

As she was discovering, grief tended to sweep over her in sudden waves that completely took her legs away. Although she had already grieved once for Jackson when the family was

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told he had died in a car accident all those years ago, and then soon after for her mother, for some reason this time it had hit her much harder. She looked helplessly at March, tears filling her eyes. She felt her mouth open and close several times before she was able to whisper ‘...why would he kill himself...?’

March nodded in that comfortingly well-bred way which indicated enough had been said and she could stop being emotional. ‘Want some water?’

Eva shook her head and took a big gulp of her drink. She forced herself to calm down.

‘What about the girlfriend?’ said March, giving her just enough time to pull herself together.

‘I’ve got her number but she’s screening my calls.’

‘If I’d have known he was living here I would have got in touch. I can’t believe we were in the same city for three years without knowing it.’

‘None of us knew he was here.’

‘He must have had other friends in Paris?’

Eva had now succeeded in righting herself.

‘Same thing. Either the French are a bloody rude race, or these particular people don’t want to speak to me,’ she joked, trying to pretend she hadn’t just peeled the walls of her chest open and shown him how much she was hurting inside.

He smiled. ‘I’ve lived here five years and I can tell you now, it’s a combination of both. You’ll get there.’

Eva drained her glass. ‘I know you’re right.’ She was grateful for the support. Most people thought she was crazy for coming over here on a hunch. If the police said Jackson had shot himself, then he had shot himself.

‘I’d probably better get back,’ she said as she felt another wave of emotion threatening.

‘I’ll walk you home.’

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As they stepped out of the bar into the cold November air, Eva began to feel herself sobering up. The sky above them was a dark, velvety black with an orange glow and there were stars twinkling everywhere she looked. She let March direct their steps; he lived in Paris after all so he was less likely to lead them in the wrong direction. However, after a while Eva realised that she was recognising some of the sights around them and they seemed to be walking away from her hotel, not towards it.

‘March, are we going in the right direction?’

He looked around. ‘Think so.’

They carried on walking in silence for several minutes until Eva stopped. She laughed as she spoke. ‘Look, I’m not being funny but I think my hotel is the other way!’

March smiled but said nothing. The hair began to stand up on the back of Eva’s neck. There was that same look she’d seen in the bar. He looked like a wolf.

She took an involuntary step backwards, but he anticipated her movement and lunged for her, grabbing hold of the front of her coat, pulling her off her feet, then dragging her with him as he stepped quickly from the quiet street they had been walking down into an alleyway lined with enormous refuse bins. Eva opened her mouth to scream but, as March shoved her upright against one of the bins, he knocked all the breath out of her. She struggled to breathe as she felt him tearing at her coat. Disbelief screamed in her head at what was apparently unfolding but she felt paralysed by the shock. She glanced at the street but it was completely empty, not even a single light on in any of the homes. Suddenly her breath returned and her senses roared into action.

‘Stop! What are you doing!’

He punched her in the face, hard. She stumbled sideways, reaching out for something to hold her up but she was seeing

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stars and her hands flailed uselessly at nothing. She landed hard on the ground and immediately he was on top of her. He went to hit her again but she managed to block him groggily with her forearm; the pain of the blow made her scream out loud. He grabbed both her wrists, wrapped one hand around them and pulled them back over her head. His grip was like iron, she couldn't rip her hands apart. She screamed as loud as she could and he slapped her with his free hand. 'Shut up,' he spat at her. 'Just shut up. You can go when I've finished with you.'

He started unbuttoning his trousers.

Eva looked him straight in the eye. 'Daniel, you were Jackson's friend,' she said, calling him by his real name, 'you were once *my* friend. Why are you doing this?' She realised she was crying.

'I'm not your friend. You have no friends here.'

Having already ripped open her coat he was now tearing at her jeans, cursing as he realised how tight they were. Suddenly he swore and stopped. He let her go, moved to a crouch and paused. Eva held her breath. Was it over?

Slowly, March pulled out a flick knife from one beautifully-tailored pocket and opened the blade.

'Take them off.'

Eva's pulse went through the roof at the sight of the knife. She glanced past him at the end of the alley only metres away but even if someone did walk past there were no lights where they were.

'*Please don't.*' She whispered.

'Do it now or I'll fucking cut you.'

She opened her mouth to speak again but he jabbed the blade in her direction. Eva felt anger ripple over the back of her scalp. Had this been his intention all along? She had met him because she had felt so lonely... so confused about Jackson ... Stupid girl. Her tears began to dry up. She slowly

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undid the patent belt and slid it from the belt loops and then she began to unbutton her jeans. She tried to pull them off but they were too skinny. 'I need to stand up. I can't get them off lying down.'

'*Hurry up,*' he roared at her. For the first time that night she realised his eyes were unfocused. Whether it was lust, power, or control she didn't know, but March was drunk on it. She hesitated for a split second and then flicked her leg up and kicked him hard in the face. March, surprised, fell back, dropped the knife, but managed to steady himself on one hand and lunged for it as it skittered towards a bin. As he dived left, Eva ran right, grabbing her bag from where it had fallen behind them and running as fast as she could out of the alleyway. She heard him curse and start running after her but she had already reached the end of the alley and as she threw herself around the corner she thought she could hear his footsteps slow. But she did not slow. Eva ran every day – seven miles, come hell or high water – and she finished every run with a sprint. That's what she did now, in four-inch heels, down a dark and empty road in the wrong part of Paris. She ran.

As Eva examined her face in the bathroom mirror the next day she felt pretty low. Overnight, the black eye that March had kindly given her had developed into a large purplish splat, with black bruising in the eye socket. When she had got back to the hotel she had spent several hours sitting bolt upright on the bed watching the chair she had propped up against the door. The sudden assault had shocked and shaken her; she had remained for a long time just sitting, staring at the door, catching each one of her thoughts when it came too close to out of control. She tried to work out what had happened; she briefly wondered whether she had done something to make it happen, but she quickly stifled those trains of thought as pointless and dangerous. Finally, her

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pulse had stopped thudding, her mind had stopped racing and she had passed out, exhausted, fully clothed in all her make-up. Now she looked like a police mug shot. Gently, she began to clean away mascara and eye-liner from the edges of her eyes. The make-up-removing wipes stung her black eye and she winced with each stroke. She stopped and looked at herself – dishevelled long dark hair, low fringe swept awkwardly to one side, face just a bit too thin.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ she said out loud to herself. But there was no reply.

As she turned on the shower and stepped into the hot clouds of steam she wondered again what the hell she was doing. Three months ago her life had been relatively normal. She edited other people’s words for a living – a dream job – she lived in London with her house-mate Isabella and she spent most of her time going from gig, to party, to shopping, to long lazy weekends. Her only real faults were an addiction to running and an inability to put the cap on the toothpaste. Then Jackson killed himself.

She heard her phone ringing as she stepped out of the shower but she let it ring, slowly dried herself and then sat down on the bed. She had just begun to get to know Jackson again – after ten years of thinking he had died in a car crash when she was sixteen. He’d promised to tell her exactly what had happened and where he had been all that time but after a year he still hadn’t and Eva felt his presence in her life was too fragile to risk pushing him to open up. Now he never would. Eva sighed and pulled the small handset over to her and watched as the phone notified her of a missed call two minutes ago. She navigated her way through her phone records. And then she stopped. Suddenly she felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. There on the screen was the identity of the caller: ‘Jackson.’

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As she continued to stare at the white display, suddenly the phone jumped into life and the name was large, filling the whole screen. 'Jackson calling.' Eva dropped the phone and pushed herself away from it, as if she had been stung. What the...

He's alive.

Just before the ringing stopped, she made a grab for the phone.

'Hello.' Her voice was tense and hard.

There was a crackle on the other end of the line. Eva had absolutely no idea what to do. 'Jackson?'

It sounded crazy just saying his name. He was dead. But he was calling her...

'Jackson...' Her voice was now almost a whisper. She pressed the phone closer to her ear listening for signs of anything on the other end and then she heard it. A breath. An exhalation. There was someone there.

'Jackson, is that you?'

The connection cut and once again Eva dropped the phone. She stared at it. For one delirious moment she allowed herself to believe that the whole horrible nightmare of the past three months was just another bad dream. But every logical cell in her body told her that it couldn't be.

Jackson's death had been reported to the family by the French police. It had a stamp of official authenticity on it which meant that no matter how much Eva wanted to believe it had been a mistake, that it was someone else who had taken his own life in a squalid flat in a Parisian suburb, it was there in black and white that it was Jackson. The police said they had found him surrounded by the paraphernalia of a serious heroin session. There were puncture wounds in his skin. The area was notorious for drugs and violence, and drugs and violence were notorious for triggering depression and suicide.

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They suggested he had got himself in so deep there was no other way out. They intimated he was a coward whose life had become out of control and that he had just given up. But Eva had lived with him for sixteen years and even though he had badly let her down, she knew he had never given up on anything.

TWO

WHEN SHE HAD RECOVERED HER composure Eva suddenly knew that there was something very wrong with the situation she found herself in. From the evasive answers she and her father had been given by the French police three months ago, to the phone call she had just received, every one of the circumstances surrounding Jackson's death made her seriously uneasy. Her skin was still tingling with adrenaline after seeing Jackson's name appear on her phone like that; she was naturally sceptical as to whether or not it was really him, but who else would it be? Even if it wasn't him, it was someone who had his phone.

Briefly, she remembered the horrible encounter with March the night before. When she had awoken that morning her mind had once again begun to turn over everything that had happened but she had quickly decided not to think about it any more. March had the problem, not her, and she needed to be clear-headed. Still, she wondered if he had any involvement in what had happened to Jackson. As he himself had said, he had been in Paris the whole time Jackson had lived here and he had attacked her so savagely the night before for no apparent reason. But realistically, what motive did he have for murder? It was more likely that he was just a serial opportunist.

Still sitting on the bed with the phone beside her, wet hair dripping onto her shoulders, Eva realised she had a clear choice.

Either she took the advice of the friends who kept worriedly

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messaging her from home, headed back to London and tried to carry on with her life; or she followed her hunch that Jackson had not taken his own life and struck out on her own: Eva Scott, vigilante. She smiled resignedly to herself. In reality she knew that there was no choice for her. She was just a regular person who had taken a few self-defence classes – she was hardly prepared for even mild peril – but she couldn't live with the knowledge that she had done nothing to find out what happened to Jackson. That wouldn't be right. Especially after that, she thought, looking at her phone.

She pulled on a pair of tight, black jeans, a wide-necked, cable-knit jumper and some leather ankle boots and combed out her long dark hair. Then she walked over to the curtains, drawing them back and letting the weak, milky light filter into the room. She threw open the window and was met with a bracing gust of Parisian air – coffee-edged with a slight hint of drains.

Coffee. She needed coffee.

Eva was eternally grateful for the fact that Paris was a city of pavement cafés and bars serving a universally high standard of coffee. She sat in the corner of a small establishment near her hotel, hunched over an English newspaper she'd bought on the way. In front of her, a black coffee, a glass of water, an untouched croissant and a small red plastic bowl containing a printed receipt. She added another sachet of sugar to the thick, dark liquid, stirred it slowly with a spoon and then placed the spoon carefully on the side of the saucer. She turned the page of the paper and took a slow sip of the strong coffee.

In front of her, the world's current affairs were laid out like a depressing comic. Pictures of politicians showing off their veneers, footballers in thousands of pounds worth of designer clothes cheating on their wives, and financiers striking deals

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that would benefit only the 1 per cent. This was the first recession she had really experienced and she had never imagined how much it would change the country she had lived in all her life. In the past few months the news had seemed even more unbelievable – banks manipulating exchange rates for their own profits, political figures making decisions against public interests motivated by big business and the destruction of seemingly permanent institutions like the National Health Service. It shocked and surprised her that – on the whole – whilst all this damage was being done to their society most Britons did nothing. But then neither did she. At the tender age of twenty-eight she had become utterly apathetic; too concerned with her own survival to put time and effort into holding anyone else to account. Jackson had left her money – an unexpectedly large amount of money – and that gave her the luxury of inaction. Without that her life right now would be very difficult.

Eva finished her coffee and signalled to the waiter for another. She took an unenthusiastic bite of her croissant. Jackson. All her thoughts came back to Jackson. Even now there was another memory, waiting at the edge of her consciousness to be let in. This was one of the fights they'd had as teenagers, often about politics – she blinkeredly left-wing and he already a staunch capitalist. Their father, a journalist for a big daily, had encouraged them to debate and question from an early age, to speak out when they felt they saw injustice. Of course, that had massively backfired on him when his affair had been uncovered. She had no doubt he had wished then that he had raised his kids to be seen and not heard.

Jackson, especially, had been unable even to look his father in the eye when that happened. At eighteen he still looked up to Paul Scott with childishly adoring eyes, but his father's affair with Irene Hunt – cheating on their mother after twenty

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years of marriage – enraged Jackson. When he crashed his car several weeks later he simply walked away, leaving the family to believe he had died. In recent months Eva had realised that she never really grieved for Jackson in the ten years that followed. Not like she was now. Perhaps somewhere deep down she had known he wasn't actually dead. She checked the display on her phone and saw she had been sitting there for half an hour. Throwing a note and a few coins into the red plastic bowl, she zipped up her leather jacket, jammed a Russian hat down over her ears and headed for the door.

The train to the suburb where Shaun Thompson lived took less than half an hour, but getting off at the station was like stepping into another world. Whilst Eva was used to the dirty, occasionally mean streets of London, by comparison Shaun lived in a very rough suburb. The area was populated with low, square blocks of flats up to four storeys high, either dirtily whitewashed or preserved in their original grey concrete. Other than the flats and the graffiti that decorated them, the area didn't seem to have much else to offer. Gangs of kids of all origins hung around, hands in pockets, kicking balls at passers-by or listening to music pumping out from the tinny speakers on their phones.

Eva felt the heaviness of being a fish out of water. She wondered why Shaun, as a foreigner, and therefore presumably a natural outsider, had made his home somewhere like this. She pulled the post-it note she had written his address on out of her bag and looked at it again: 134 Rue des Villiers. According to the very old map she had managed to acquire from her hotel – the only one they had that went out as far as this suburb – the flat was on the same road as the station.

When she reached it, she found that Shaun's block of flats was one of the nicest on the street, although that wasn't saying much. Running to four storeys, the whitewash had retained a

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little of its gleam and someone had planted flowerbeds either side of the path leading from the road to the front door. There was a small, white-haired man standing outside with a brush, repeatedly sweeping the same spot of concrete.

‘Hello.’ Eva smiled directly at him, choosing to speak English to try and discover straight away whether she could avoid having a whole conversation in painful broken French. The man continued to sweep his spot and totally ignored her.

‘Hello?’

As she leaned in a little closer, Eva noticed he was singing to himself and smelled quite badly of urine.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, don’t mind my father.’

She jumped as a younger woman appeared from the ground floor flat and placed her hands around the old man’s shoulders. He stopped rocking and looked at her.

‘Can I help at all?’

‘You speak English,’ Eva smiled, unable to contain her relief.

‘Yes, I learned from my father, he used to be very good at it.’ She stopped and gazed at the vacant old man.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Eva awkwardly.

‘It will happen to us all someday!’ the woman said cheerfully and rearranged her long, dark hair into a tortoiseshell comb that sat just above her left ear. ‘Did you want something?’

‘Yes, I’m looking for someone called Shaun Thompson. Apparently he lives here.’

‘Shawan...?’ The woman frowned.

‘Thompson.’

The woman thought for a second. ‘You know, I know everyone in this block – there are only sixteen flats – and there is no one by that name.’

‘I was given this as his address.’ Eva handed over the post-it note.

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‘Well, this is the same address. Are you sure they have the right person?’

‘Yes, I think so. He’s English?’

‘But, of course, that’s Shoon!’

Eva stared at the woman nonplussed, wondering if she was as mad as her father.

‘Yes, he’s the only English person for miles around. Yes, Shoon,’ she said again, saying the name so that it sounded nothing like Eva’s pronunciation – the English pronunciation.

‘He lives at number nine – third floor, second door on the right. You’ll have to take the stairs, I’m afraid, as the lift is broken.’ She smiled apologetically and put her hands back on the old man’s shoulders, gently drawing him back to the flat. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘Thanks very much.’

Eva followed the couple in through the front door and then started up the first set of concrete stairs that, like all stairwells, seemed to smell of smoke and urine. When she reached the third floor, she followed the woman’s instructions and went to Shaun’s door. His name was scrawled neatly in a small plastic box on the right but there didn’t appear to be a bell. She took her hat off and shoved it into her bag, knocked quickly at the scuffed surface of the wooden door and waited. No answer. She waited a couple of minutes and then knocked again but there was still no response. Glancing around to make sure no one was looking she pressed her left ear up against the door to try and detect signs of movement. The door creaked open. Eva stepped back. She looked around again to see if any of the other residents in the housing block had noticed her, but there didn’t seem to be anyone around. Gently, she pushed the door so that it was fully open and took several steps inside.

‘Hello?... er... Shaun?’

No answer.

Eva walked further into the flat then paused and looked

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back at the open doorway. Still no sound came from the hallway. If anyone had noticed, they were keeping themselves to themselves. She took a deep breath. Was she really going to do this? She wanted to find Shaun himself, not go searching through his flat. And why was his front door open? Realising she was probably wasting her time, she turned back towards the door, about to leave. Suddenly she stopped.

In the corner of the door leading through to what looked like the living room was a bare foot, sole up. The foot was completely still. Eva stepped closer, her heart almost stopping as she held her breath, knowing there was only going to be one outcome to this regrettable burst of curiosity.

She walked quickly into the living room, came to a sudden halt and rocked backwards on her heels, a scream stuck somewhere in the back of her throat. *Oh my god.*

A man – presumably Shaun – stared back at her from the floor, eyes wide and bulging. His mouth was open and gaping and his body was lying twisted at an unnatural angle, his lower half facing down and his upper torso twisted so that from the waist up he was lying on his side, almost on his back. A wave of nausea overwhelmed Eva and she turned out of the living room door and retched. When she managed to compose herself she looked again at the corpse; his eyes were wide open, desperate, almost surprised, his naked body so white against the faux wood flooring. She took several steps towards him, slowly bent down and felt for a pulse, just in case. Nothing. She stepped back again. She had never seen a corpse before; the complete stillness was unnerving. There were red marks around Shaun's wrists but other than that she couldn't see anything on the flaxen white skin that could explain his sudden demise. There was no blood, no knife wound, no ligature marks around the neck. She took a tentative step forward and leaned in closer, fighting her

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imagination that was convinced he would rear up and suddenly grab at her like a character from a cheap horror film.

Then she noticed an angry red dot on the back of his right thigh. It was tiny and wouldn't have attracted her attention except that it was so red and his body so white. She bent down and looked at the mark, aware of her breath coming in short, measured bursts. It was a small red welt, like a small version of the mark she'd been left with after a Hepatitis B injection before a holiday several years ago. It was the mark left by a needle. I have to get out of here, she thought suddenly as a flight reflex kicked in. She started towards the door but something held her back. Shouldn't she look around? If someone had come here based on the same information she had, then maybe she was on to something. Shaun's death could be completely unrelated but maybe it wasn't; maybe there was something here that might give her some clue about what had happened to Jackson.

Very slowly, her heart hammering, Eva walked back to the front door of the flat and pushed it closed. She returned to the living room, trying to ignore the growing sense of unease creeping up her spine. The living room was tiny, dark and a total mess but empty of hidden attackers. Although all the curtains were drawn, all the windows in the flat were open, which was probably why the smell of the corpse had not reached her at the door or drawn the attention of the neighbours. In the middle of the room was a tiny TV perched on a stack of books, an old battered orange armchair and a low metal coffee table littered with cigarette butts.

There was no obvious place to look for anything – no letters, no bag, no wallet, no mobile phone, nothing – even if she had

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known what she was looking for. She noticed a lone birthday card embossed with 'Happy Birthday Son' perched on top of a grubby mantelpiece. She quickly looked away. Another family would have to go through what hers had. Eva tried to focus. If she were Shaun, where would she keep her important documents? She looked around again. It didn't look like Shaun had any important documents, there didn't seem to be anything of value in the whole flat.

Then she heard an electronic beep. Muffled at first, but when she heard it again she realised it was coming from the orange armchair. She ran over and threw off the cushion and there, underneath, was a mobile phone, singing out at regular intervals to indicate its battery was low. That would do. She grabbed the phone, stuffed it in her bag and turned back towards the door. As she was walking out of the living room, she heard footsteps coming up the stairs towards the flat and she stopped and stood still. A woman's voice was speaking in French she could just about understand, telling someone 'she went in there.'

Eva scanned the room and noticed a fire escape ladder through one of the open windows on the other side of the fluttering curtains. She ran over and threw herself out, clinging to the rusted railings, wincing in pain as small slices of paint cut up underneath her nails. She forced herself down the ladder as fast as she could go and jumped the last two rungs, accidentally ripping a small part off the inside of her coat as she became airborne. She grabbed the material off the ladder and picked up a small black button that had fallen at the same time, determined to leave no trace. Eva glanced up to see if anyone was looking out of the window at her but she hadn't been spotted.

Suddenly there was a terrified scream from the flat upstairs.

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Obviously whoever was up there had discovered Shaun's body.

Eva got as far as the bottom of the fire escape before she had to check her pace. Outside Shaun's apartment block at the front, two police cars idled at the kerb. From her position behind a large bin, Eva could see two policemen, one in each of the cars, which presumably left a maximum of two other policemen inside. She tried to calm her frantic heartbeat. *Think.* Had the woman downstairs called the police? They had arrived very quickly if she had. But why would she do that? Eva's skin chilled. There was no reason for the woman downstairs to have called the police so someone else must have done it – someone who knew exactly where Eva was. From what she had heard from inside the flat – 'she's in there' – the police seemed to have been looking specifically for her, which should have been impossible as no one knew she was here. But it looked like someone did know.

Eva tried to remember whether she had touched anything in the flat. While it was unlikely that the rough material of the orange armchair would provide a good surface for fingerprints, the door she had pushed open certainly would. Was she being set up? She felt the heaviness of Shaun's phone in her bag and realised it would not look good if she was caught sneaking out of the flat of a dead man with his phone, no matter how innocent she might be. She needed to get out of there. Suddenly there was movement out front and both policemen in both cars got out and walked towards the front door of the flats. At the same time Eva noticed a figure appear at the top of the fire escape she had jumped down. She had to move. Now.

As soon as the two policemen at the front disappeared through the door Eva left the protection of the bins. Veering

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left out of the flats she crossed the road that led back to the station and, unable to walk in front of the flats and risk being seen, went deeper into the housing development opposite to try and find her way around. Here, the flats were in a far worse state than Shaun's. At every step Eva took she could feel her presence attracting attention. She walked quickly past a stairwell occupied by six young men, all wearing loose, dark clothing and staring at her with a mix of suspicion and anticipation. She quickened her pace. By the time she was at the edge of the estate she thought she could feel a presence behind her. Unable to turn around, Eva pressed forward and tried to ignore the scenarios playing out in her head. Instinctively, she veered right again and hoped she was walking back towards the station.

Almost as soon as she rounded the corner, Eva felt an urgency push all her senses into overdrive. She turned slightly, reacting to movement to the left of her field of vision and thought she saw one of the men from the stairwell running towards her, steel glinting in his hand in the weak wintery sunshine. *A knife.* Immediately she took off in the opposite direction, pumping her hands to force her body forward, despite the cold grip of panic that had taken hold of her throat and lungs. She rounded another corner in the maze of narrow passageways that ran between the mid-height tower blocks of the housing complex and skidded, almost colliding with an old woman in a printed scarf who shouted something unintelligible at her, but she had no time for apologies. Running down an uneven path, Eva was aware that at every step she could stumble or trip, giving her pursuer the opportunity to close the tiny gap between them. She considered stopping and challenging whoever was behind her but instinctively she felt that would not end well. *Keep going.* Ducking under a line of fresh washing Eva ran on, risked a

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quick glance behind her and then hearing footsteps just behind the wall of laundry, pushed her body to move faster, get further away.

Suddenly, around another corner a wall rose up in front of her. The way ahead was blocked.

Stopping momentarily, Eva made a quick calculation, ran to the wall, pulled herself up onto a plastic bin and then tried to pull her body up onto the top of the wall. Her flailing feet kicked the bin over and it spilled its stinking contents all over the floor. She fought desperately to pull herself up to the peak of the wall but her arms were too weak and the rough surface was already stripping the skin from her fingers. Eva tried one more time to heave herself up over the wall but it was too high and, horrified, she realised she was slipping. As she lost her grip she landed in the rubbish, slipped backwards, struggled to find her footing and then turned herself around so that she was facing whoever was following her. For what seemed like minutes, the path behind her remained empty. Then very slowly, a small group of men, those she had seen at the stairwell, rounded the end of the narrow passageway. When they were just paces away they stopped and looked at her; they must have been all of fifteen but they were working hard at being menacing.

Eva realised she had made a big mistake coming into what was essentially their turf and then reacting like a spooked deer. There had been no trained assassin following her. Obviously they had nothing to do with Shaun. She had allowed her imagination – and maybe the residual fear after being attacked by March the night before – to get the better of her. She took a deep breath. Slowly, she walked towards them. As she reached the group of five, she smiled at the first boy, a tracksuit-clad figure, taller than her, his eyes

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rimmed with dark circles and his dark hair shorn close to his skull.

‘Ton mobile.’

Her smile quickly faded. Eva ignored him and took a step to the right, trying to walk around the group but they fanned out, completely blocking her path.

‘Your mo-bile,’ the boy repeated, this time in halting English, and then held out his hand. Eva hesitated. What choice did she have? She reached into her bag and handed over her phone then, in a split second, wished she had given them the device she had taken from Shaun’s flat instead. Too late now, she thought, trying to meet the boy’s eye with a steady gaze.

‘And cash.’ His English was appropriated from gangster films, and as if to illustrate his point, he lifted two fingers and rubbed them together in the air, causing the four boys standing behind him to laugh menacingly. She handed over a small leather purse and the boy opened it and peered inside. ‘Carte?’

She shook her head and opened her palms. ‘I don’t carry them.’ It was a lie but she hid her cards separately for this very reason and she wasn’t about to just hand them over to this child.

A flash of anger crossed the boy’s features and he glared at her, bristling at the reply. Clearly a stolen credit card was worth much more than a foreign phone or such a small amount of cash. He continued to glare at her, apparently waiting for her to flinch but Eva stared him down and the boy seemed to have no wish to search her or take possession of her bag. After several heart-stopping minutes, he made a clicking sound in his throat, nodded briefly at her and then ambled off, his crew following behind. Eva stood motionless in the alleyway, her heart thundering in her chest. Never in her life

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had so much happened to her in 48 hours. Suddenly she felt a vibration against her hip. She opened up her bag to see that Shaun's phone had sprung to life.

There on the stark white screen were two words: 'Jackson calling.'