from

The Likeness

by

Tana French

“[Tana French] aces her second novel. *The Likeness* [is a] nearly pitch-perfect follow-up to her 2007 debut thriller, *In the Woods*.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

Tana French astonished critics and readers alike with her mesmerizing debut novel, In the Woods. Now Detective Cassie Maddox returns to unravel a case even more sinister and enigmatic than the first.

Six months after the events of In the Woods, an urgent telephone call beckons Cassie to a grisly crime scene. The victim looks exactly like Cassie and carries ID identifying herself as Alexandra Madison, an alias Cassie once used. Suddenly, Cassie must discover not only who killed this girl, but, more importantly, who she is.
Some nights, if I’m sleeping on my own, I still dream about Whitethorn House. In the dream it’s always spring, cool fine light with a late-afternoon haze. I climb the worn stone steps and knock on the door—that great brass knocker, going black with age and heavy enough to startle you every time—and an old woman with an apron and a deft, uncompromising face lets me in. Then she hangs the big rusted key back on her belt and walks away down the drive, under the falling cherry blossom, and I close the door behind her.

The house is always empty. The bedrooms are bare and bright, only my footsteps echoing off the floorboards, circling up through the sun and the dust motes to the high ceilings. Smell of wild hyacinths, drifting through the wide-open windows, and of beeswax polish. Chips of white paint flaking off the window sashes and a tendril of ivy swaying in over the sill. Wood doves, lazy somewhere outside.

In the sitting room the piano is open, wood glowing chestnut and almost too bright to look at in the bars of sun, the breeze stirring the yellowed sheet music like a finger. The table is laid ready for us, five settings—the bone-china plates and the long-stemmed wineglasses, fresh-cut honeysuckle trailing from a crystal bowl—but the silverware has gone dim with tarnish and the heavy damask napkins are frilled with dust. Daniel’s cigarette case lies by his place at the head of the table, open and empty except for a burnt-down match.

Somewhere in the house, faint as a fingernail-flick at the edge of my hearing, there are sounds: a scuffle, whispers. It almost stops my heart. The others aren’t gone, I got it all wrong somehow. They’re only hiding; they’re still here, for ever and ever.

I follow the tiny noises through the house room by room, stopping at every step to listen, but I’m never quick enough: they slide away like mirages, always
just behind that door or up those stairs. The tip of a giggle, instantly muffled; a creak of wood. I leave wardrobe doors swinging open, I take the steps three at a time, I swing round the newel post at the top and catch a flash of movement in the corner of my eye: the spotted old mirror at the end of the corridor, my face reflected in it, laughing.
This is Lexie Madison’s story, not mine. I’d love to tell you one without getting into the other, but it doesn’t work that way. I used to think I sewed us together at the edges with my own hands, pulled the stitches tight and I could unpick them any time I wanted. Now I think it always ran deeper than that and farther, underground; out of sight and way beyond my control.

This much is mine, though: everything I did. Frank puts it all down to the others, mainly to Daniel, while as far as I can tell Sam thinks that, in some obscure and slightly bizarro way, it was Lexie’s fault. When I say it wasn’t like that, they give me careful sideways looks and change the subject—I get the feeling Frank thinks I have some creepy variant of Stockholm syndrome. That does happen to undercovers sometimes, but not this time. I’m not trying to protect anyone; there’s no one left to protect. Lexie and the others will never know they’re taking the blame and wouldn’t care if they did. But give me more credit than that. Someone else may have dealt the hand, but I picked it up off the table, I played every card, and I had my reasons.

This is the main thing you need to know about Alexandra Madison: she never existed. Frank Mackey and I invented her, a long time ago, on a bright summer afternoon in his dusty office on Harcourt Street. He wanted people to infiltrate a drug ring in University College Dublin. I wanted the job, maybe more than I had ever wanted anything in my life.

He was a legend: Frank Mackey, still in his thirties and already running undercover operations; the best Undercover agent Ireland’s ever had, people said, reckless and fearless, a tightrope artist with no net, ever. He walked into IRA cells and criminal gangs like he was walking into his local pub. Everyone had told me the story: when the Snake—a career gangster and five-star wacko, who once left one of his own men quadriplegic for not buying his round—got
suspicious and threatened to use a nail gun on Frank’s hands, Frank looked
him in the eye without breaking a sweat and bluffed him down till the Snake
slapped him on the back and gave him a fake Rolex by way of apology. Frank
still wears it.

I was a shiny green rookie, only a year out of Templemore Training Col-
lege. A couple of days earlier, when Frank had sent out the call for cops who
had a college education and could pass for early twenties, I had been wearing
a neon yellow vest that was too big for me and patrolling a small town in Sligo
where most of the locals looked disturbingly alike. I should have been nervous
of him, but I wasn’t, not at all. I wanted the assignment too badly to have
room for anything else.

His office door was open and he was sitting on the edge of his desk, wear-
ing jeans and a faded blue T-shirt, flipping through my file. The office was
small and had a disheveled look, like he used it mainly for storage. The desk
was empty, not even a family photo; on the shelves, paperwork was mixed in
with blues CDs, tabloids, a poker set and a woman’s pink cardigan with the
tags still on. I decided I liked this guy.

“Cassandra Maddox,” he said, glancing up.

“Yes, sir,” I said. He was average height, stocky but fit, with good shoulders
and close-cut brown hair. I’d been expecting someone so nondescript he was
practically invisible, maybe the Cancer Man from The X Files, but this guy had
rough, blunt features and wide blue eyes, and the kind of presence that leaves
heat streaks on the air where he’s been. He wasn’t my type, but I was pretty
sure he got a lot of female attention.

“Frank. ‘Sir’ is for desk jockeys.” His accent was old inner-city Dublin,
subtle but deliberate, like a challenge. He slid off the desk and held out his
hand.

“Cassie,” I said, shaking it.

He pointed at a chair and went back to his perch on the desk. “Says here,”
he said, tapping my file, “you’re good under pressure.”

It took me a second to figure out what he was talking about. Back when
I was a trainee posted to a scuzzy part of Cork city, I had talked down a
panicked teenage schizophrenic who was threatening to cut his own throat
with his grandfather’s straight razor. I had almost forgotten about that. It
hadn’t occurred to me, till then, that this was probably why I was up for
this job.

“I hope so,” I said.

“You’re, what—twenty-seven?”
“Twenty-six.”

The light through the window was on my face and he gave me a long, considering look. “You can do twenty-one, no problem. Says here you’ve three years of college. Where?”

“Trinity. Psychology.”

His eyebrows shot up, mock-impressed. “Ah, a professional. Why didn’t you finish?”

“I developed an unknown-to-science allergy to Anglo-Irish accents,” I told him.

He liked that. “UCD going to bring you out in a rash?”

“I’ll take my antihistamines.”

Frank hopped off his desk and went to the window, motioning me to follow. “OK,” he said. “See that couple down there?”

A guy and a girl, walking up the street, talking. She found keys and let them into a depressing apartment block. “Tell me about them,” Frank said. He leaned back against the window and hooked his thumbs in his belt, watching me.

“They’re students,” I said. “Book bags. They’d been food shopping—the carrier bags from Dunne’s. She’s better off than he is; her jacket was expensive, but he had a patch on his jeans, and not in a trendy way.”

“They a couple? Friends? Flatmates?”

“A couple. They walked closer than friends, tilted their heads closer.”

“They going out long?”

I liked this, the new way my mind was working. “A while, yeah,” I said. Frank cocked an eyebrow like a question, and for a moment I wasn’t sure how I knew; then it clicked. “They didn’t look at each other when they were talking. New couples look at each other all the time; established ones don’t need to check in as often.”

“Living together?”

“No, or he’d have automatically gone for his keys as well. That’s her place. She has at least one flatmate, though. They both looked up at a window: checking to see if the curtains were open.”

“How’s their relationship?”

“Good. She made him laugh—guys mostly don’t laugh at a girl’s jokes unless they’re still at the chat-up stage. He was carrying both the Dunne’s bags, and she held the door open for him before she went in: they look after each other.”

Frank gave me a nod. “Nicely done. Undercover’s half intuition—and I
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don’t mean psychic shite. I mean noticing things and analyzing them, before you even know you’re doing it. The rest is speed and balls. If you’re going to say something or do something, you do it fast and you do it with total conviction. If you stop to second-guess yourself, you’re fucked, possibly dead. You’ll be out of touch a lot, the next year or two. Got family?”

“An aunt and uncle,” I said.

“Boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll be able to contact them, but they won’t be able to contact you. They going to be OK with that?”

“They’ll have to be,” I said.

He was still slouching easily against the window frame, but I caught the sharp glint of blue: he was watching me hard. “This isn’t some Colombian cartel we’re talking about, and you’ll be dealing mostly with the lowest ranks—at first, anyway—but you’ve got to know this job isn’t safe. Half these people are binned out of their heads most of the time, and the other half are very serious about what they do, which means none of them would have any problem with the idea of killing you. That make you nervous?”

“No,” I said, and I meant it. “Not at all.”

“Lovely,” said Frank. “Let’s get coffee and get to work.”

It took me a minute to realize that that was it: I was in. I’d been expecting a three-hour interview and a stack of weird tests with inkblots and questions about my mother, but Frank doesn’t work like that. I still don’t know where, along the way, he made the decision. For a long time, I waited for the right moment to ask him. Now I’m not sure, any more, whether I want to know what he saw in me; what it was that told him I would be good at this.

We got burnt-tasting coffee and a packet of chocolate biscuits from the canteen, and spent the rest of the day coming up with Alexandra Madison. I picked the name—“You’ll remember it better that way,” Frank said. Madison, because it sounds enough like my own surname to make me turn around, and Lexie because when I was a kid that was the name of my imaginary sister. Frank found a big sheet of paper and drew a timeline of her life for me. “You were born in Holles Street Hospital on the first of March 1979. Father, Sean Madison, a minor diplomat, posted in Canada—that’s so we can pull you out fast if we need to: give you a family emergency, and off you go. It also means you can spend your childhood traveling, to explain why nobody knows you.” Ireland is small; everyone’s cousin’s girlfriend went to school with you. “We
could make you foreign, but I don’t want you fucking about with an accent. Mother, Caroline Kelly Madison. She got a job?”

“She’s a nurse.”

“Careful. Think faster; keep an eye out for implications. Nurses need a new license for every country. She trained, but she quit working when you were seven and your family left Ireland. Want brothers and sisters?”

“Sure, why not,” I said. “I’ll have a brother.” There was something intoxicating about this. I kept wanting to laugh, just at the lavish giddy freedom of it: relatives and countries and possibilities spread out in front of me and I could pick whatever I wanted, I could grow up in a palace in Bhutan with seventeen brothers and sisters and a personal chauffeur if I felt like it. I shoved another biscuit into my mouth before Frank could see me smiling and think I wasn’t taking this seriously.

“Whatever your heart desires. He’s six years younger, so he’s in Canada with your parents. What’s his name?”

“Stephen.” Imaginary brother; I had an active fantasy life as a kid.

“Do you get on with him? What’s he like? Faster,” Frank said, when I took a breath.

“He’s a little smart-arse. Football-mad. He fights with our parents all the time, because he’s fifteen, but he still talks to me . . .”

Sun slanting across the scarred wood of the desk. Frank smelled clean, like soap and leather. He was a good teacher, a wonderful teacher; his black Biro scribbled in dates and places and events, and Lexie Madison developed out of nothing like a Polaroid, she curled off the page and hung in the air like incense smoke, a girl with my face and a life from a half-forgotten dream. When did you have your first boyfriend? Where were you living? What was his name? Who dumped who? Why? Frank found an ashtray, flipped a Player’s out of his packet for me. When the sun bars slid off the desk and the sky started to dim outside the window, he spun his chair around, took a bottle of whiskey off a shelf and spiked our coffees: “We’ve earned it,” he said. “Cheers.”

We made her a restless one, Lexie: bright and educated, a good girl all her life, but brought up without the habit of settling and never learned the knack. A little naïve maybe, a little unguarded, too ready to tell you anything you asked without thinking twice. “She’s bait,” Frank said bluntly, “and she has to be the right bait to make the dealers rise. We need her innocent enough that they won’t consider her a threat, respectable enough to be useful to them, and rebellious enough that they won’t wonder why she wants to play.”
By the time we finished, it was dark. “Nice work,” Frank said, folding up the timeline and passing it to me. “There’s a detective training course starting in ten days; I’ll get you into that. Then you’ll come back here and I’ll work with you for a while. When UCD starts back in October, you’ll go in.”

He hooked a leather jacket off the corner of the shelves, switched off the light and shut the door on the dark little office. I walked back to the bus station dazzled, wrapped in magic, floating in the middle of a secret and a brand-new world, with the timeline making little crackling sounds in the pocket of my uniform jacket. It was that quick, and it felt that simple.

I’m not going to get into the long, snarled chain of events that took me from Undercover to Domestic Violence. The abridged version: UCD’s premier speed freak got paranoid and stabbed me, wounded-in-the-line-of-duty got me a place on the Murder squad, the Murder squad got to be a head-wrecker, I got out. It had been years since I’d thought about Lexie and her short shadowy life. I’m not the type to look back over my shoulder, or at least I try hard not to be. Gone is gone; pretending anything else is a waste of time. But now I think I always knew there would be consequences to Lexie Madison. You can’t make a person, a human being with a first kiss and a sense of humor and a favorite sandwich, and then expect her to dissolve back into scribbled notes and whiskeyed coffee when she no longer suits your purposes. I think I always knew she would come back to find me, someday.

It took her four years. She picked her moment carefully. When she came knocking, it was an early morning in April, a few months after the end of my time in Murder, and I was at the firing range.

The range we use is underground in the city center, deep under half the cars in Dublin and a thick layer of smog. I didn’t need to be there—I’ve always been a good shot, and my next qualifying test wasn’t for months—but for the last while I had been waking up way too early for work and way too restless for anything else, and target practice was the only thing I had found that worked the jitters out of me. I took my time adjusting the earmuffs and checking my gun, waited till everyone else was concentrating on their own targets, so they wouldn’t see me galvanizing like an electrocuted cartoon character on the first few shots. Being easily freaked out comes with its own special skill set: you develop subtle tricks to work around it, make sure people don’t notice. Pretty soon, if you’re a fast learner, you can get through the day looking almost exactly like a normal human being.
I never used to be like that. I always figured nerves were for Jane Austen characters and helium-voiced girls who never buy their round; I would no more have turned shaky in a crisis than I would have carried smelling salts around in my reticule. Getting stabbed by the Drug Demon of UCD barely even fazed me. The department shrink spent weeks trying to convince me I was deeply traumatized, but eventually he had to give up, admit I was fine (sort of regretfully; he doesn’t get a lot of stabbed cops to play with, I think he was hoping I would have some kind of fancy complex) and let me go back to work.

Embarrassingly, the one that got me wasn’t a spectacular mass murder or a hostage crisis gone bad or a nice quiet guy with human organs in his Tupperware. My last case in Murder was such a simple one, so much like dozens of others, nothing to warn us: just a little girl dead on a summer morning, and my partner and me goofing off in the squad room when the call came in. From outside, it even went well. Officially, we got a solve in barely a month, society was saved from the evildoer, it looked all pretty in the media and in the end-of-year stats. There was no dramatic car chase, no shootout, nothing like that; I was the one who came off worst, physically anyway, and all I had was a couple of scratches on my face. They didn’t even leave scars. Such a happy ending, all round.

Underneath, though. Operation Vestal: say it to one of the Murder squad, even now, even one of the guys who don’t know the whole story, and you’ll get that instant look, hands and eyebrows going up meaningfully as he distances himself from the clusterfuck and the collateral damage. In every way that mattered, we lost and we lost big. Some people are little Chernobyls, shimmering with silent, spreading poison: get anywhere near them and every breath you take will wreck you from the inside out. Some cases—as any cop—are malignant and incurable, devouring everything they touch.

I came out with a variety of symptoms that would have made the shrink bounce up and down in his little leather sandals, except that mercifully it didn’t occur to anyone to send me to the shrink for a scratched face. It was your standard-issue trauma stuff—shaking, not eating, sticking to the ceiling every time the doorbell or the phone rang—with a few ornamentations of my own. My coordination went funny; for the first time in my life I was tripping on my own feet, bumping into doorjambs, bonking my head off cupboards. And I stopped dreaming. Before, I had always dreamed in great wild streams of images, pillars of fire spinning across dark mountains, vines exploding through solid brick, deer leaping down Sandymount beach wrapped in ropes.
of light; afterwards, I got thick black sleep that hit me like a mallet the second my head touched the pillow. Sam—my boyfriend, although that idea still startled me sometimes—said to give it time, it would all wear off. When I told him I wasn’t so sure, he nodded peacefully and said that would wear off too. Every now and then Sam got right up my nose.

I considered the traditional cop solution—booze, early and often—but I was scared I would end up phoning inappropriate people at three in the morning to spill my guts, plus I discovered that target practice anaesthetized me almost as well and without any messy side effects. This made almost no sense, given the way I was reacting to loud noises in general, but I was OK with that. After the first few shots a fuse would blow in the back of my brain and the rest of the world vanished somewhere faint and far away, my hands turned rock-steady on the gun and it was just me and the paper target, the hard familiar smell of powder in the air and my back braced solid against the recoil. I came out calm and numb as if I’d been Valiumed. By the time the effect wore off, I had made it through another day at work and I could go whack my head off sharp corners in the comfort of my own home. I’d got to the point where I could make nine head shots out of ten, at forty yards, and the wizened little man who ran the range had started looking at me with a horse trainer’s eye and making noises about the department championships.

I finished up around seven, that morning. I was in the locker room, cleaning my gun and trying to shoot the breeze with two guys from Vice without giving them the impression that I wanted to go get breakfast, when my mobile phone rang.

“Jesus,” one of the Vice boys said. “You’re DV, aren’t you? Who has the energy to beat up his missus at this hour?”

“You can always make time for the things that really matter,” I said, digging my locker key out of my pocket.

“Maybe it’s black ops,” said the younger guy, grinning at me. “Looking for sharpshooters.” He was big and redheaded, and he thought I was cute. He had his muscles arranged to full advantage, and I had caught him checking out my ring finger.

“Must’ve heard we weren’t available,” said his mate.

I fished the phone out of my locker. The screen said SAM O’NEILL, and the missed-call icon was flashing at me in one corner.

“Hi,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Cassie,” Sam said. He sounded terrible: breathless and sick, as if someone had punched the wind out of him. “Are you OK?”
I turned my shoulder to the Vice guys and moved off into a corner. “I’m fine. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Jesus Christ,” Sam said. He made a hard little noise like his throat was too tight. “I called you four times. I was about to send someone over to your place looking for you. Why didn’t you answer your bloody phone?”

This was not like Sam. He’s the gentlest guy I’ve ever known. “I’m at the firing range,” I said. “It was in my locker. What’s happened?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to . . . sorry.” He made that harsh little sound again.

“I got called out. On a case.”

My heart gave one huge whap against my rib cage. Sam is on the Murder squad. I knew I should probably sit down for this, but I couldn’t make my knees bend. I leaned back against the lockers instead.

“What? No—God, no, it’s not . . . I mean, it’s not anyone we know. Or anyway I don’t think—Listen, can you come down here?”

My breath came back. “Sam,” I said. “What the hell is going on?”

“Just . . . can you just come? We’re in Wicklow, outside Glenskehy. You know it, right? If you follow the signs, go through Glenskehy village and keep going straight south, about three-quarters of a mile on there’s a little lane to your right—you’ll see the crime-scene tape. We’ll meet you there.”

The Vice boys were starting to look interested. “My shift starts in an hour,” I said. “It’ll take me that long just to get out there.”

“I’ll call it in. I’ll tell DV we need you.”

“You don’t. I’m not in Murder any more, Sam. If this is a murder case, it’s nothing to do with me.”

A guy’s voice in the background: a firm, easy drawl, hard to ignore; familiar, but I couldn’t place it. “Hang on,” Sam said.

I clamped the phone between my ear and my shoulder and started fitting my gun back together. If it wasn’t someone we knew, then it had to be a bad one, to make Sam sound like that; very bad. Irish homicides are still, mostly, simple things: drug fights, burglaries gone wrong, SOS killings (Spouse On Spouse or, depending who you ask, Same Old Shite), this elaborate family feud in Limerick that’s been screwing up the figures for decades. We’ve never had the orgies of nightmare that other countries get: the serial killers, the ornate tortures, the basements lined with bodies thick as autumn leaves. But it’s only a matter of time, now. For ten years Dublin’s been changing faster than our minds can handle. The economic boom has given us too many people with helicopters and too many crushed into cockroachy flats from hell,
way too many loathing their lives in fluorescent cubicles, enduring for the weekend and then starting all over again, and we’re fracturing under the weight of it. By the end of my stint in Murder I could feel it coming: felt the high sing of madness in the air, the city hunching and twitching like a rabid dog building towards the rampage. Sooner or later, someone had to pull the first horror case.

We don’t have official profilers, but the Murder guys, who mostly didn’t go to college and who were more impressed by my psychology semi-degree than they should have been, used to use me. I was OK at it; I read textbooks and statistics a lot, in my spare time, trying to catch up. Sam’s cop instincts would have overridden his protective ones and he would have called me in, if he needed to; if he’d got to a scene and found something bad enough.

“Hang on,” the redhead said. He had switched out of display mode and was sitting up straight on his bench. “You used to be in Murder?” This right here was exactly why I hadn’t wanted to get chummy. I had heard that avid note way too many times, over the past few months.

“Once upon a time,” I said, giving him my sweetest smile and my you-do-not-want-to-go-there look.

Redser’s curiosity and his libido had a quick duel; apparently he figured out that his libido’s chances were slim to none anyway, because the curiosity won. “You’re the one who worked that case, right?” he said, sliding a few lockers closer. “The dead kid. What’s the real story?”

“All the rumors are true,” I told him. On the other end of the phone Sam was having a muffled argument, short frustrated questions cut off by that easy drawl, and I knew that if the redhead would just shut up for a second I could work out who it was.

“I heard your partner went mental and shagged a suspect,” Redser informed me, helpfully.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, trying to disentangle myself from my bullet-proof vest without losing the phone. My first instinct was—still—to tell him to do something creative to himself, but neither my ex-partner’s mental status nor his love life was my problem, not any more.

Sam came back on the phone sounding even more tense and rattled. “Can you wear sunglasses, and a hood or a hat or something?”

I stopped with my vest half over my head. “What the hell?”

“Please, Cassie,” Sam said, and he sounded strained to breaking point. “Please.”
I drive an ancient, bockety Vespa, which is like totally uncool in a town where you are what you spend, but which has its uses. In city traffic it moves about four times as fast as your average SUV, I can actually park it, and it provides a handy social shortcut, in that anyone who gives it a snotty look is probably not going to be my new best friend. Once I got out of the city, it was perfect bike weather. It had rained during the night, furious sleety rain slapping at my window, but that had blown itself out by dawn and the day was sharp and blue, the first of almost-spring. Other years, on mornings like this one, I used to drive out into the countryside and sing at the top of my lungs into the wind at the edge of the speed limit.

Glenskehy is outside Dublin, tucked away in the Wicklow mountains near nothing very much. I’d lived half my life in Wicklow without getting any closer to it than the odd signpost. It turned out to be that kind of place: a scatter of houses getting old around a once-a-month church and a pub and a sell-everything shop, small and isolated enough to have been overlooked even by the desperate generation trawling the countryside for homes they can afford. Eight o’clock on a Thursday morning, and the main street—to use both words loosely—was postcard-perfect and empty, just one old woman pulling a shopping cart past a worn granite monument to something or other, little sugared-almond houses lined up crookedly behind her, and the hills rising green and brown and indifferent over it all. I could imagine someone getting killed there, but a farmer in a generations-old fight over a boundary fence, a woman whose man had turned savage with drink and cabin fever, a man sharing a house with his brother forty years too long: deep-rooted, familiar crimes old as Ireland, nothing to make a detective as experienced as Sam sound like that.

And that other voice on the phone was nagging at me. Sam is the only detective I know who doesn’t have a partner. He likes flying solo, working every case with a new team—local uniforms who want a hand from an expert, pairs from the Murder squad who need a third man on a big case. Sam can get along with anyone, he’s the perfect backup man, and I wished I knew which of the people I used to work with he was backing up this time.

Outside the village the road narrowed, twisting upwards among bright gorse bushes, and the fields got smaller and rockier. There were two men standing on the crest of the hill. Sam, fair and sturdy and tense, feet planted apart and hands in his jacket pockets; and a few feet from him, someone else,
head up, leaning back against the stiff wind. The sun was still low in the sky and their long shadows turned them giant and portentous, silhouetted almost too bright to look at against skimming clouds, like two messengers walking out of the sun and down the shimmering road. Behind them, crime-scene tape fluttered and whipped.

Sam raised his hand when I waved. The other guy cocked his head sideways, one fast tilt like a wink, and I knew who it was.

“Fuck me briefly,” I said, before I was even off the Vespa. “It’s Frankie. Where did you come from?”

Frank grabbed me off the ground in a one-armed hug. Four years hadn’t managed to change him one bit; I was pretty sure he was even wearing the same banged-up leather jacket. “Cassie Maddox,” he said. “World’s best fake student. How’ve you been? What’s all this about DV?”

“I’m saving the world. They gave me a lightsaber and all.” I caught Sam’s confused frown out of the corner of my eye—I don’t talk much about undercover, I’m not sure he’d ever heard me mention Frank’s name—but it was only when I turned to him that I realized he looked awful, white around the mouth and his eyes too wide. Something inside me clenched: a bad one.

“How’re you doing?” I asked him, pulling off my helmet.

“Grand,” Sam said. He tried to smile at me, but it came out lopsided.

“Oo,” Frank said, mock-camp, holding me at arm’s length and eyeballing me. “Check you out. Is this what the well-dressed detective is wearing these days?” The last time he had seen me, I’d been in combats and a top that said “Miss Kitty’s House of Fun Wants YOU.”

“Bite me, Frank,” I told him. “At least I’ve changed my gear once or twice in the last few years.”

“No, no, no, I’m impressed. Very executive.” He tried to spin me round; I batted his hand away. Just for the record, I was not dressed like Hillary Clinton here. I was wearing my work clothes—black trouser suit, white shirt—and I wasn’t that crazy about them myself, but when I switched to Domestic Violence my new superintendent kept going on at me about the importance of projecting an appropriate corporate image and building public confidence, which apparently cannot be done in jeans and a T-shirt, and I didn’t have the energy to resist. “Bring sunglasses and a hoodie or something?” Frank asked. “They’ll go great with this getup.”

“You brought me down here to discuss my fashion sense?” I inquired. I found an ancient red beret in my satchel and waved it at him.

“Nah, we’ll get back to that some other time. Here, have these.” Frank
pulled sunglasses out of his pocket, repulsive mirrored things that belonged on Don Johnson in 1985, and passed them to me.

“If I’m going to go around looking like that much of a dork,” I said, eyeing them, “there had better be a damn good explanation.”

“We’ll get to that. If you don’t like those, you can always wear your helmet.” Frank waited till I shrugged and put on the dork gear. The buzz of seeing him had dissolved and my back was tensing up again. Sam looking sick, Frank on the case and not wanting me spotted at the scene: it read a lot like an undercover had got killed.

“Gorgeous as always,” Frank said. He held the crime-scene tape for me to duck under, and it was so familiar, I had made that quick easy movement so many times, that for a split second it felt like coming home. I automatically settled my gun at my belt and glanced over my shoulder for my partner, as if this was my own case I were coming to, before I remembered.

“Here’s the story,” Sam said. “At about quarter past six this morning, a local fella called Richard Doyle was walking his dog along this lane. He let it off the lead to have a run about in the fields. There’s a ruined house not far off the lane, and the dog went in and wouldn’t come out; in the end, Doyle had to go after it. He found the dog sniffing around the body of a woman. Doyle grabbed the dog, legged it out of there and rang the uniforms.”

I relaxed a little: I didn’t know any other women from Undercover. “And I’m here why?” I asked. “Not to mention you, sunshine. Did you transfer into Murder and no one told me?”

“You’ll see,” Frank said. I was following him down the lane and I could only see the back of his head. “Believe me, you’ll see.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Sam. “Nothing to worry about,” he said quietly. He was getting his color back, in bright uneven splotches. “You’ll be grand.”

The lane sloped upwards, too narrow for two people to walk abreast, just a muddy track with ragged hawthorn hedges spilling in on both sides. Where they broke, the hillside was crazy-quilted into green fields scattered with sheep—a brand-new lamb was bleating somewhere, far off. The air was cold and rich enough to drink, and the sun sifted long and gold through the hawthorn; I considered just keeping on walking, over the brow of the hill and on, letting Sam and Frank deal with whatever seething dark blotch was waiting for us under the morning. “Here we go,” Frank said.

The hedge fell away to a broken-down stone wall bordering a field left to run wild. The house was thirty or forty yards off the lane: one of the Famine
cottages that still litter Ireland, emptied in the nineteenth century by death or emigration and never reclaimed. One look added another layer to my feeling that I wanted to be very far away from whatever was going on here. The whole field should have been alive with focused, unhurried movement—uniforms working their way across the grass with their heads bent, Technical Bureau crew in white coveralls busy with cameras and rulers and print dust, morgue guys unloading their stretcher. Instead there were two uniforms, shifting from foot to foot on either side of the cottage door and looking slightly out of their depth, and a pair of pissed-off robins bouncing around the eaves making outraged noises.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

I was talking to Sam, but Frank said, “Cooper’s been and gone”—Cooper is the state pathologist. “I figured he needed to have a look at her as fast as possible, for time of death. The Bureau can wait; forensic evidence isn’t going anywhere.”

“Jesus,” I said. “It is if we walk on it. Sam, ever worked a double homicide before?”

Frank raised an eyebrow. “Got another body?”

“Yours, once the Bureau get here. Six people wandering all over a crime scene before they’ve cleared it? They’re gonna kill you.”

“Worth it,” Frank said cheerfully, swinging a leg over the wall. “I wanted to keep this under wraps for a little while, and that’s hard to do if you’ve got Bureau guys swarming all over the place. People tend to notice them.”

Something was badly wrong here. This was Sam’s case, not Frank’s; Sam should have been the one deciding how the evidence was handled and who got called in when. Whatever was in that cottage, it had shaken him up enough that he had let Frank sweep in, bulldoze him out of the way and instantly, efficiently start arranging this case to suit whatever agenda he had today. I tried to catch Sam’s eye, but he was pulling himself over the wall and not looking at either of us.

“Can you climb walls in that getup,” Frank inquired sweetly, “or would you like a hand?” I made a face at him and vaulted into the field, up to my ankles in long wet grass and dandelions.

The cottage had been two rooms, once, a long time ago. One of them still looked more or less intact—it even had most of its roof—but the other was just shards of wall and windows onto open air. Bindweed and moss and little trailing blue flowers had rooted in the cracks. Someone had spray-painted _shaz_ beside the doorway, not very artistically, but the house was too inconve-
nient for a regular hangout: even prowling teenagers had mostly left it alone, to collapse on itself in its own slow time.


“For our sins,” said Byrne. He sounded like he meant it. He was somewhere in his fifties, with a slumped back and watery blue eyes, and he smelled of wet uniform and loser.

Doherty was a gangly kid with unfortunate ears, and when I held out my hand to him he did a double take straight out of a cartoon; I could practically hear the boing of his eyeballs snapping back into place. God only knew what he'd heard about me—cops have a better rumor mill than any bingo club—but I didn’t have time to worry about it right then. I gave him the smile-and-stare number, and he mumbled something and dropped my hand as if it had scorched him.

“We’d like Detective Maddox to take a look at our body,” Frank said.

“I’d say you would, all right,” said Byrne, eyeing me. I wasn’t sure he meant it the way it sounded; he didn’t look like he had the energy. Doherty snickered nervously.

“Ready?” Sam asked me quietly.

“The suspense is killing me,” I said. It came out a little snottier than I intended. Frank was already ducking into the cottage and pulling aside the long sprays of trailing bramble that curtained the doorway to the inner room.

“Ladies first,” he said, with a flourish. I hung the stud-muffin glasses off the front of my shirt by one earpiece, took a breath and went in.

It should have been a peaceful, sad little room. Long bands of sun slanting through holes in the roof and filtering past the net of branches over the windows, shivering like light on water; some family’s hearth, cold a hundred years, with piles of bird’s-nest fallen down the chimney and the rusty iron hook for the cooking pot still hanging ready. A wood dove murmuring contentedly, somewhere nearby.

But if you’ve seen a dead body, you know how they change the air: that huge silence, the absence strong as a black hole, time stopped and molecules frozen around the still thing that’s learned the final secret, the one he can never tell. Most dead people are the only thing in the room. Murder victims are different; they don’t come alone. The silence rises up to a deafening shout and the air is streaked and hand-printed, the body smokes with the brand of that other person grabbing you just as hard: the killer.
The first thing that hit me about this scene, though, was how slight a mark the killer had left. I had been bracing myself against things I didn’t want to imagine—naked and spread-eagled, vicious dark wounds too thick to count, body parts scattered in corners—but this girl looked as if she had arranged herself carefully on the floor and let out her last breath in a long even sigh, chosen her own time and place with no need for anyone’s help along the way. She was lying on her back among the shadows in front of the fireplace, neatly, with her feet together and her arms at her sides. She was wearing a navy pea-coat, falling open; under it were indigo jeans—pulled up and zipped—runners and a blue top with a dark star tie-dyed across the front. The only thing out of the ordinary was her hands, clenched into tight fists. Frank and Sam had moved in beside me, and I shot Frank a puzzled look—

And the big deal is?

—but he just watched me, his face giving away nothing.

She was medium height, built like me, compact and boyish. Her head was turned away from us, towards the far wall, and all I could see in the dim light was short black curls and a slice of white: high round curve of a cheekbone, the point of a small chin. “Here,” Frank said. He flicked on a tiny, powerful torch and caught her face in a sharp little halo.

For a second I was confused—Sam lied?—because I knew her from somewhere, I’d seen that face a million times before. Then I took a step forwards, so I could get a proper look and the whole world went silent, frozen, darkness roaring in from the edges and only the girl’s face blazing white at the center; because it was me. The tilt of the nose, the wide sweep of the eyebrows, every tiniest curve and angle clear as ice: it was me, blue-lipped and still, with shadows like dark bruises under my eyes. I couldn’t feel my hands, my feet, couldn’t feel myself breathing. For a second I thought I was floating, sliced off myself and wind currents carrying me away.

“Know her?” Frank asked, somewhere. “Any relation?”

It was like going blind; my eyes couldn’t take her in. She was impossible: a high-fever hallucination, a screaming crack straight across all the laws of nature. I realized I was braced rigid on the balls of my feet, one hand halfway to my gun, every muscle ready to fight this dead girl to the death. “No,” I said. My voice sounded wrong, somewhere outside me. “Never seen her.”

“You adopted?”

Sam whipped his head around, startled, but the bluntness was good, it helped like a pinch. “No,” I said. For an awful, rocking instant I actually wondered. But I’ve seen photos, my mother tired and smiling in a hospital bed, brand-new me at her breast. No.
“Which side do you look like?”
“What?” It took me a second. I couldn’t look away from the girl; I had to force myself to blink. No wonder Doherty and his ears had done a double take. “No. My mother’s side. It’s not that my father was running around, and this is . . . No.”

Frank shrugged. “Worth a shot.”
“They say everyone’s got a double, somewhere,” Sam said quietly, beside me. He was too close; it took me a second to realize that he was ready to catch me, just in case.

I am not the fainting type. I bit down, hard and fast, on the inside of my lip; the jolt of pain cleared my head. “Doesn’t she have ID?”

I knew, from the tiny pause before either of them answered, that something was up. Shit, I thought, with a new thump in my stomach: identity theft.

I wasn’t too clear on how it worked exactly, but one glimpse of me and a creative streak and presumably this girl could have been sharing my passport and buying BMWs on my credit.

“She had a student card on her,” Frank said. “Key ring in the left-hand pocket of her coat, Maglite in the right, wallet in the front right pocket of her jeans. Twelve quid and change, an ATM card, a couple of old receipts and this.” He fished a clear plastic evidence bag out of a pile by the door and slapped it into my hand.

It was a Trinity College ID, slick and digitized, not like the laminated bits of colored paper we used to have. The girl in the photo looked ten years younger than the white, sunken face in the corner. She was smiling my own smile up at me and wearing a striped baker-boy cap turned sideways, and for a second my mind flailed wildly: But I never had a striped one of those, did I, when did I—I pretended to tilt the card to the light, reading the small print, so I could turn my shoulder to the others. Madison, Alexandra J.

For a whirling instant, I understood completely: Frank and I had done this. We made Lexie Madison bone by bone and fiber by fiber, we baptized her and for a few months we gave her a face and a body, and when we threw her away she wanted more. She spent four years spinning herself back, out of dark earth and night winds, and then she called us here to see what we had done.

“What the hell,” I said, when I could breathe.

“When the uniforms called it in and ran her name through the computer,” Frank said, taking back the bag, “she came up flagged: anything happens to this girl, call me ASAP. I never bothered taking her out of the system; I figured we might need her again, sooner or later. You never know.”
“Yeah,” I said. “No kidding.” I stared hard at the body and got a grip: this was no golem, this was a real live dead girl, oxymoron and all. “Sam,” I said. “What’ve we got?”

Sam shot me a quick, searching glance; when he realized I wasn’t about to swoon or scream or whatever he’d had in mind, he nodded. He was starting to look a little more like himself. “White female,” he said, “mid-twenties to early thirties, single stab wound to the chest. Cooper says she died sometime around midnight, give or take an hour. He can’t be more specific: shock, ambient temperature variations, whether there was physical activity around the time of death, all the rest of it.”

Unlike most people, I get on well with Cooper, but I was glad I’d missed him. The tiny cottage felt too full, full of clumping feet and people shifting and eyes on me. “Stabbed here?” I asked.

Sam shook his head. “Hard to tell. We’ll wait and see what the Bureau says, but all that rain last night got rid of a lot—we won’t be finding footprints in the lane, a blood trail, nothing like that. For what it’s worth, though, I’d say this isn’t our primary crime scene. She was on her feet for at least a while after she got stabbed. See there? Blood’s dripped straight down the leg of her jeans.”

Frank shifted the torch beam, obligingly. “And there’s mud on both knees and a rip in one, like she was running and she fell.”

“Looking for cover,” I said. The image surged up at me like something from every forgotten nightmare: the lane twisting into the dark and her running, feet slipping helplessly on pebbles and her breath wild in her ears. I could feel Frank carefully standing back, saying nothing; watching.

“Could be,” Sam said. “Maybe the killer was coming after her, or she thought he was. She could’ve left a trail straight from his front door, for all we’ll ever know; it’s long gone.”

I wanted to do something with my hands, rub them through my hair, over my mouth, something. I shoved them in my pockets to keep them still. “So she got into shelter and collapsed.”

“Not exactly. I’m thinking she died over there.” Sam pulled back the brambles and nodded at a corner of the outer room. “We’ve got what looks like a fair-sized pool of blood. No way to be sure exactly how much—we’ll see if the Bureau can help there—but if there’s still plenty left after a night like this, I’d say there was a load of it to start with. She was probably sitting up against that wall—most of the blood is on the front of her top and on the lap and seat of her jeans. If she’d been lying down, it’d have seeped down her sides. See this?”
He pointed to the girl’s top, and the penny dropped with a bang: not tie-dye. “She twisted up the top and pressed it against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding.”

Huddled deep in that corner; rush of rain, blood seeping warm between her fingers. “So how’d she get over here?” I asked.

“Our boy caught up with her in the end,” Frank said. “Or someone did, anyway.”

He leaned over, lifted one of the girl’s feet by the shoelace—it sent a fast twitch down the back of my neck, him touching her—and tilted his torch at the heel of her runner: scuffed and brown, grained deep with dirt. “She was dragged. After death, because there’s no pooling under the body: by the time she got over here, she wasn’t bleeding any more. The guy who found her swears he didn’t touch, and I believe him. He looked like he was about to puke his guts up; no way he got closer than he had to. Anyway, she was moved not too long after she died. Cooper says rigor hadn’t set in yet, and there’s no secondary lividity—and she didn’t spend much time out in that rain. She’s barely damp. If she’d been in the open all night, she’d be drenched.”

Slowly, as if my eyes were only just adjusting to the dim light, I realized that all the dark patches and stipples that I had taken for shadows and rainwater were actually blood. It was everywhere: streaked across the floor, soaking the girl’s jeans, crusting her hands wrist-deep. I didn’t want to look at her face, at anyone’s face. I kept my eyes on her top and unfocused them so that the dark star swam and blurred. “Got footprints?”

“Zip,” Frank said. “Not even hers. You’d think, with all this dirt; but, like Sam here said, the rain. All we’ve got in the other room is a shitload of mud, with prints matching the guy who called it in and his dog—that’s one reason I wasn’t too worried about walking you through there. Same thing out in the lane. And in here . . .” He moved the torch beam around the edges of the floor, nosed it into corners: wide, blank sweeps of dirt, way too smooth. “That’s what it all looked like, when we got here. Those prints you’re seeing around the body, those are us and Cooper and the uniforms. Whoever moved her stuck around to tidy up after himself. There’s a broken branch of gorse in the middle of the field, probably came off that big bush by the door; I’m guessing he used it to sweep the floor clean as he left. We’ll see if the Bureau pulls blood or prints off it. And to go with no footprints . . .”

He handed me another evidence bag. “See anything wrong?”

It was a wallet, white fake leather, sewn with a butterfly in silver thread and swiped with faint traces of blood. “It’s too clean,” I said. “You said this was in
her front jeans pocket, and she bled out all over her lap. This should be covered with blood."

“Bingo. The pocket’s stiff with it, soaked through, but somehow this barely gets stained? The torch and keys are the same: not a drop of blood, just a few smudges. Looks like our boy went through her pockets and then wiped her stuff clean before he put it back. We’ll have the Bureau fingerprint everything that’ll stay still long enough, but I wouldn’t bet on getting anything useful. Someone was being very, very careful.”

“Any sign of sexual assault?” I asked. Sam flinched. I was way past that.

“Cooper won’t say for sure till the post-mortem, but nothing on the preliminary points that way. We might get lucky and find some foreign blood on her”—a lot of stabbers cut themselves—“but, basically, I’m not holding my breath for DNA.”

My first impression—the invisible killer, leaving no trace—hadn’t been far off. After a few months in Murder, you can tell One of Those Cases a mile away. With the last clear corner of my mind I reminded myself that, no matter what it looked like, this one was not my problem. “Great,” I said. “What do you have? Anything on her, other than she’s in Trinity and she’s running around wearing a fake name?”

“Sergeant Byrne says she’s local,” Sam said. “Lives at Whitethorn House, maybe half a mile away, with a bunch of other students. That’s all he knows about her. I haven’t talked to the housemates yet, because . . .” He gestured at Frank.

“Because I begged him to hold off,” Frank said smoothly. “I have this little idea I wanted to run by you two, before the investigation gets into full gear.” He arched an eyebrow towards the door and the uniforms. “Maybe we should go for a wander.”

“Why not,” I said. The girl’s body was doing something funny to the air in there, fizzing it, like the needle-thin whine the TV makes on mute; it was hard to think straight. “If we stay in the same room for too long, the universe might turn into antimatter.” I gave Frank his evidence bag back and wiped my hand on the side of my trousers.

In the moment before I passed through the doorway I turned my head and looked at her, over my shoulder. Frank had switched off his torch, but pulling back the brambles let in a flood of spring sun and for the split second before my shadow blocked it again she rose up blazing out of the darkness, tilted chin and a clenched fist and the wild arch of her throat, bright and bloodied and relentless as my own wrecked ghost.
That was the last time I saw her. It didn’t occur to me at the time—I had other stuff on my mind—and it seems impossible now, but those ten minutes, sharp as a crease pressed straight across my life: that was the only time we were ever together.

The uniforms were slumped where we had left them, like beanbags. Byrne was staring off into the middle distance in some kind of catatonic state; Doherty was examining one finger in a way that made me think he had been picking his nose.

“Right,” Byrne said, once he surfaced from his trance and registered that we were back. “We’ll be off, so. She’s all yours.”

Sometimes the local uniforms are pure diamond—reeling off details about everyone for miles around, listing half a dozen possible motives, handing you a prime suspect on a plate. Other times, all they want is to pass the hassle to you and get back to their game of Go Fish. This was obviously going to be other times.

“We’ll need you to hang on for a while,” Sam said, which I took as a good sign—the extent to which Frank had been running this show was making me edgy. “The Technical Bureau might want you to help with the search, and I’ll be asking you to give me all the local info you can.”

“She’s not local, sure,” Doherty said, wiping his finger on the side of his trousers. He was staring at me again. “Them up at Whitethorn House, they’re blow-ins. They’ve nothing to do with Glenskehy.”

“Lucky bastards,” Byrne mumbled, to his chest.

“She lived local, though,” Sam said patiently, “and she died local. That means we’ll be needing to canvass the area. You should probably give us a hand, seeing as ye know your way around.”

Byrne’s head sank farther into his shoulders. “They’re all mentallers, round here,” he said morosely. “Stone mentallers. That’s all you need to know.”

“Some of my best friends are mentallers,” Frank said cheerfully. “Think of it as a challenge.” He gave them a wave and headed off up the field, feet swishing wetly through the grass.

Sam and I followed him. Even without looking I could feel the worried little line between Sam’s eyebrows, but I didn’t have the energy to reassure him. Now I was out of that cottage, all I could feel was outrage, pure and simple. My face and my old name: it was like coming home one day and finding another girl coolly making dinner in your kitchen, wearing your comfiest jeans.
and singing along to your favorite CD. I was so furious I could barely breathe. I thought of that photo and I wanted to punch my smile straight off her face.

“Well,” I said, when we caught up with Frank at the top of the field, “that was fun. Can I go to work now?”

“DV must be a lot more entertaining than I thought,” Frank said, doing impressed, “if you’re in this much of a hurry. Sunglasses.”

I left the glasses where they were. “Unless this girl was a victim of domestic violence, and I’m not seeing anything that points that way, she’s got sweet fuck-all to do with me. So you dragged me out here why, exactly?”

“Hey, I’ve missed you, babe. Any excuse.” Frank grinned at me; I gave him a hairy look. “And you seriously figure she’s fuck-all to do with you? Let’s see you say that when we’re trying to ID her, and everyone you’ve ever known is freaking out and ringing up to give us your name.”

All the anger deflated out of me, leaving a nasty hollow at the bottom of my stomach. Frank, the little bollocks, was right. As soon as this girl’s face went into the papers alongside an appeal for her real name, there would be a tidal wave of people who had known me as Lexie, her as Lexie, me as me, all of them wanting to know who was dead and who both of us had been if we weren’t in fact Lexie Madison, and general hall-of-mirrors overload. Believe it or not, that was the first time it hit me: there was no way in the world for this to be as easy as Don’t know her, don’t want to know her, thanks for wasting my morning, see you around.

“Sam,” I said. “Is there any way you could hold off on putting her picture out for a day or two? Just till I can warn people.” I had no idea how I was going to word this one. See, Aunt Louisa, we found this dead girl and . . .

“Interestingly,” Frank said, “now that you mention it, that fits right in with my little idea.” There was a jumble of moss-covered boulders piled in the corner of the field; he pulled himself backwards onto them and sat there, one leg swinging.

I’d seen that gleam in his eyes before. It always meant he was about to come out, spectacularly casually, with something totally outrageous. “What, Frank,” I said.

“Well,” Frank began, getting comfortable against the rocks and folding his arms behind his head, “we’ve got a unique opportunity here, haven’t we? Shame to waste it.”

“We do?” Sam said.

“We do?” I said.
“Oh, yeah. Jesus, yeah.” That risky grin was starting at the corners of Frank’s mouth. “We’ve got the chance,” he said, taking his time, “we’ve got the chance to investigate a murder case from the inside. We’ve got the chance to place an experienced undercover officer smack in the middle of a murder victim’s life.”

We both stared at him.

“When have you ever seen anything like that before? It’s beautiful, Cass. It’s a work of art.”

“Work of arse, more like,” I said. “What the hell are you on about, Frankie?”

Frank spread his arms like it was obvious. “Look. You’ve been Lexie Madison before, right? You can be her again. You can—if she’s not dead, just wounded, right? You can walk straight back into her life and pick up where she left off.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “This is why no Bureau and no morgue guys? This is why you made me dress like a dork? So nobody notices you have a spare?” I pulled my hat off and stuffed it back in my bag. Even for Frank, this had taken some fast thinking. Within seconds of arriving at the scene, he must have had this in his head.

“You can get hold of info no cop would ever learn, you can get close to everyone she was close to, you can identify suspects—”

“You want to use her as bait,” Sam said, too levelly.

“I want to use her as a detective, mate,” Frank said. “Which is what she is, last time I checked.”

“You want to put her in there so this fella will come back to finish the job. That’s bait.”

“So? Undercovers are bait all the time. I’m not asking her to do anything I wouldn’t do myself in a heartbeat, if—”

“No,” Sam said. “No way.”

Frank raised an eyebrow. “What are you, her ma?”

“I’m the lead investigator on this case, and I’m saying no way.”

“You might want to think about it for more than ten seconds, pal, before you—”

I might as well not have been there. “Hello?” I said.

They turned and stared at me. “Sorry,” Sam said, somewhere between sheepish and defiant.

“Hi,” Frank said, grinning at me.

“Frank,” I said, “this is officially the looniest idea I’ve ever heard in my life.
You are off your bloody trolley. You are up the wall and tickling the bricks. You are—"

“What’s loony about it?” Frank demanded, injured.

“Jesus,” I said. I ran my hands through my hair and turned full circle, trying to figure out where to start. Hills, fields, spaced-out uniforms, cottage with dead girl: this wasn’t some messed-up dream. “OK, just for starters, it’s impossible. I’ve never even heard of anything like this before.”

“But that’s the beauty of it,” Frank explained.

“If you go under as someone who actually exists, it’s for like half an hour, Frank, and it’s to do something specific. It’s to do a drop-off or a pickup or something, from a stranger. You’re talking about me jumping right into the middle of this girl’s life, just because I look a bit like her—”

“A bit?”

“Do you even know what color her eyes are? What if they’re blue, or—”

“Give me some credit, babe. They’re brown.”

“Or what if she programs computers, or plays tennis? What if she’s left-handed? It can’t be done. I’d be burned inside an hour.”

Frank pulled a squashed pack of smokes out of his jacket pocket and fished out a cigarette. He had that glint in his eye again; he loves a challenge. “I have every faith in you. Want a smoke?”

“No,” I said, even though I did. I couldn’t stop moving, up and down and around the patch of long grass between us.

I don’t even like her, I wanted to say, which made no sense at all.

Frank shrugged and lit up. “Let me worry about whether it’s possible. It might not be, I’ll grant you that, but I’ll figure that out as we go along. What’s next?”

Sam was looking away, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, leaving me to it. “Next,” I said, “it’s somewhere out on the other side of unethical. This girl must have family, friends. You’re going to tell them she’s alive and well and just needs a few stitches, while she’s lying on a table in the morgue with Cooper slicing her open? Jesus, Frank.”

“She’s living under a fake name, Cass,” Frank said, reasonably. “You really think she’s in touch with her family? By the time we track them down, this will all be over. They’ll never know the difference.”

“So what about her mates? The uniforms said she lives with a bunch of others. What if she’s got a boyfriend?”

“The people who care about her,” Frank said, “will want us to catch the
guy who did this to her. Whatever it takes. That’s what I’d want.” He blew 
smoke up at the sky.

Sam’s shoulders shifted. He thought Frank was just being smart-arsed. But Sam’s never done undercover, he had no way of knowing: undercovers are different. There is nothing they won’t do, to themselves or anyone else, to take their guy down. There was no point in arguing with Frank on this one, because he meant what he had said: if his kid were killed, and someone kept that from him in order to get the guy, he would take it without a murmur. It’s one of the most powerful lures of undercover, the ruthlessness, no borderlines; strong stuff, strong enough to take your breath away. It’s one of the reasons I left.

“And then what?” I said. “When it’s over. You tell them, ‘Oops, by the 
way, we forgot to mention, that’s a ringer; your mate died three weeks ago?’ Or do I keep being Lexie Madison till I can die of old age?”

Frank squinted into the sun, considering this. “Your wound can get 
infected,” he said, brightening. “You’ll go into the ICU and the doctors will 
try everything modern medicine can offer, but no go.”

“Jesus Christ on a bike,” I said. I felt like this was all I had said, all morning long. “What on earth is making this seem like a good idea to you?”

“What’s next?” Frank asked. “Come on, hit me.”

“Next,” Sam said, still looking away down the lane, “it’s bloody 
dangerous.”

Frank raised one eyebrow and tilted his head at Sam, giving me a wicked 
private grin. For an off-balance second I had to stop myself grinning back.

“Next,” I said, “it’s too late anyway. Byrne and Doherty and Whatsisname 
with the dog all know there’s a dead woman in there. You’re telling me you 
can get all three of them to keep their mouths shut, just because it suits you? Whatsisname’s probably told half of Wicklow already.”

“Whatsisname is Richard Doyle, and I’m not planning on getting him to 
keep his mouth shut. As soon as we’re done here, I’m going to go congratulate 
him on saving this young woman’s life. If he hadn’t shown great presence of 
mind by calling us immediately, the outcome could have been tragic. He’s a 
hero, and he can tell as many people as he likes. And you saw Byrne, babe. 
That’s not a happy little member of our glorious brotherhood. If I hint that 
there might be a transfer in it for him, not only will he keep his mouth shut, 
he’ll keep Doherty’s shut too. Next?”

“Next,” I said, “it’s pointless. Sam’s worked dozens of murders, Frank, and
he’s solved most of them, without needing to pull any wack-job stunts. This thing you’re talking about would take weeks to set up—"

“Days, anyway,” Frank amended.

—and by that time he’ll have someone. At least, he will if you don’t fuck up his investigation by getting everyone to pretend there’s no murder to begin with. All this will do is waste your time and mine and everyone else’s.”

“Would it fuck up your investigation?” Frank asked Sam. “Just hypothetically speaking. If you told the public—just for, say, a couple of days—that this was an assault, not a murder. Would it?”

Eventually Sam sighed. “No,” he said. “Not really, no. There’s not that much difference in investigating attempted murder and actual murder. And, like Cassie said, we’ll have to keep this pretty quiet for a few days anyway, till we find out who the victim is, so things don’t get too confused. But that’s not the point.”

“OK,” Frank said. “Then here’s what I suggest. Mostly you guys have a suspect within seventy-two hours, right?”

Sam said nothing.

“Right?”

“Right,” Sam said. “And there’s no reason why this should be different.”

“No reason at all,” Frank agreed, pleasantly. “Today’s Thursday. Just through the weekend, we keep our options open. We don’t tell civilians it’s a murder. Cassie stays home, so there’s no chance of the killer getting a glimpse of her, and we’ve got our ace up the sleeve if we decide to use it. I find out everything I can about this girl, just in case—that would need doing anyway, am I right? I won’t get in your way, you’ve got my word on that. Like you said, you’re bound to have someone in your sights by Sunday night. If you do, then I back off, Cassie goes back to DV, everything goes back to standard procedure, no harm done. If by any chance you don’t . . . well, we’ve still got all our options.”

Neither of us answered.

“I’m only asking for three days, guys,” Frank said. “No commitment to anything. What damage can that do?”

Sam looked marginally reassured by this, but I wasn’t, because I knew how Frank works: a series of little tiny steps, each one looking perfectly safe and innocuous until suddenly, bam, you’re smack in the middle of something you really did not want to deal with. “But why, Frank?” I asked. “Answer me that and yeah, fine, I’ll spend a gorgeous spring weekend sitting in my flat watching crap telly instead of going out with my boyfriend like a normal human
being. You’re talking about throwing huge amounts of time and manpower at something that could well turn out to be completely pointless. Why?"

Frank whipped a hand up to shade his eyes so he could stare at me. “Why?” he repeated. “Jesus, Cassie! Because we can. Because nobody in the history of police work has ever had a chance like this. Because it would be bloody amazing. What, you’re not seeing that? What the fuck is wrong with you? Have you gone desk on me?”

I felt like he had hauled off and punched me in the stomach. I stopped pacing and turned away, looking out over the hillside, away from Frank and Sam and from the uniforms twisting their heads into the cottage to gawp at wet dead me.

After a moment Frank said behind me, softer, “Sorry, Cass. I just wasn’t expecting that. From the Murder gang, sure, but not from you, of all people. I didn’t think you meant . . . I thought you were just covering all the bases. I didn’t realize.”

He sounded genuinely stunned. I knew perfectly well he was working me and I could have listed every tool he was using, but it didn’t matter; because he was right. Five years earlier, one year earlier, I would have been leaping for this dazzling incomparable adventure right alongside him, I’d have been in there checking whether the dead girl’s ears were pierced and how she parted her hair. I looked out at the fields and thought, very distinctly and detachedly, *What the fuck has happened to me?*

“OK,” I said, finally. “What you tell the press isn’t my problem; you guys fight it out between you. I’ll stay out of the way for the weekend. But, Frank, I’m not promising you anything else. No matter who Sam finds or doesn’t find. This does not mean I’m doing it. Clear enough?”

“That’s my girl,” Frank said. I could hear the grin in his voice. “For a moment there I thought the aliens had planted a chip in your brain.”

“Fuck off, Frank,” I said, turning around. Sam didn’t look happy, but I couldn’t worry about that just then. I needed to get away on my own and think about this.

“I haven’t said yes yet,” Sam said.

“It’s your call, obviously,” Frank said. He didn’t seem too worried. I knew he might have more of a fight on his hands than he expected. Sam is an easy-going guy, but every now and then he puts his foot down, and then trying to change his mind is like trying to push a house out of your way. “Just call it fast. If we’re going with this, for now anyway, we’ll need to get an ambulance out here ASAP.”
“Let me know what you decide,” I told Sam. “I’m going home. See you tonight?” Frank’s eyebrows shot up. Undercovers have an impressive grapevine all their own, but they mostly stay away from the general gossip, in a slightly pointed way, and Sam and I had been keeping things fairly quiet. Frank gave me an amused look, tongue rolling in his cheek. I ignored him.

“I don’t know when I’ll finish up,” Sam said.
I shrugged. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“See you soon, babe,” Frank said happily, through another cigarette, and waved good-bye.

Sam walked me back down the field, close enough that his shoulder brushed mine protectively; I got the sense he didn’t want me to have to pass the body on my own. Actually, I badly wanted to have another look at it, preferably by myself and for a long silent time, but I could feel Frank’s eyes on my back, so I didn’t even turn my head as we passed the cottage.

“I wanted to warn you,” Sam said abruptly. “Mackey said no. He was pretty insistent about it, and I wasn’t thinking straight enough to . . . I should’ve. I’m sorry.”

Obviously Frank, like everyone else in my bloody universe, had heard the Operation Vestal rumors. “He wanted to see how I’d take it,” I said. “Checking my nerve. And he’s good at getting what he wants. It’s OK.”

“This Mackey. Is he a good cop?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. “Good cop” isn’t a phrase we take lightly. It means a vast complex constellation of things, and a different one for every officer. I wasn’t at all sure that Frank fit Sam’s definition, or even, come to think of it, mine. “He’s smart as hell,” I said, in the end, “and he gets his man. One way or another. Are you going to give him his three days?”

Sam sighed. “If you’re all right with staying in this weekend, then yeah, I’d say I will. It’ll do no harm, actually, keeping this case under the radar till we’ve some idea what we’re dealing with—an ID, a suspect, something. It’ll keep the confusion down. I’m not mad about giving her friends false hope, but sure, I suppose it could soften the blow—having the few days to get used to the chance that she might not make it . . .”

It was shaping up to be a gorgeous day; the sun was drying the grass and it was so quiet I could hear tiny insects zigzagging in and out among the wildflowers. There was something about the green hillsides that made me edgy, something stubborn and secretive, like a turned back. It took me a second to
figure out what it was: they were empty. Out of all Glenskehy, not one person had come to see what was going on.

Out in the lane, screened from the others by trees and hedges, Sam pulled me tight against him.

“I thought it was you,” he said into my hair. His voice was low and shaking. “I thought it was you.”