from

In the Woods

by

Tana French

"Tana French's intense debut novel, *In the Woods,* is part whodunit, part psychological thriller, and wholly successful. . . . French's plot twists and turns will bamboozle even the most astute reader. . . . A well-written, expertly plotted thriller."

—Nancy Pearl, correspondent for NPR's *Morning Edition*

In the summer of 1984, three children leave their small Dublin neighborhood to play in the surrounding woods. Hours later, their mothers' calls go unanswered. When the police arrive, they find only one of the children, gripping a tree trunk in terror, wearing blood-filled sneakers, and unable to recall a single detail of the previous hours.

Twenty years later, Detective Rob Ryan—the found boy, who has kept his past a secret—and his partner Cassie Maddox investigate the murder of a twelve-year-old girl in the same woods. Now, with only snippets of long-buried memories to guide him, Ryan has the chance to uncover both the mystery of the case before him, and that of his own shadowy past.

Prologue

Picture a summer stolen whole from some coming-of-age film set in small-town 1950s. This is none of Ireland's subtle seasons mixed for a connoisseur's palate, watercolor nuances within a pinch-sized range of cloud and soft rain; this is summer full-throated and extravagant in a hot pure silkscreen blue. This summer explodes on your tongue tasting of chewed blades of long grass, your own clean sweat, Marie biscuits with butter squirting through the holes and shaken bottles of red lemonade picnicked in tree houses. It tingles on your skin with BMX wind in your face, ladybug feet up your arm; it packs every breath full of mown grass and billowing wash lines; it chimes and fountains with birdcalls, bees, leaves and football-bounces and skipping-chants, *One! two! three!* This summer will never end. It starts every day with a shower of Mr. Whippy notes and your best friend's knock at the door, finishes it with long slow twilight and mothers silhouetted in doorways calling you to come in, through the bats shrilling among the black lace trees. This is Everysummer decked in all its best glory.

Picture an orderly little maze of houses on a hill, only a few miles from Dublin. Someday, the government declared, this will be a buzzing marvel of suburban vitality, a plan-perfect solution to overcrowding and poverty and every urban ill; for now it is a few handfuls of cloned semi-detacheds, still new enough to look startled and gauche on their hillside. While the government rhapsodized about McDonald's and multiscreens, a few young families—escaping from the tenements and outdoor toilets that went unmentioned in 1970s Ireland, or dreaming big back gardens and hopscotch roads for their children, or just buying as close to home as a teacher's or bus driver's salary would let them—packed rubbish bags and bumped along a two-track path, grass and daisies growing down the middle, to their mint-new start.

That was ten years ago, and the vague strobe-light dazzle of chain stores and community centers conjured up under "infrastructure" has so far failed to materialize (minor politicians occasionally bellow in the Dáil, unreported,

about shady land deals). Farmers still pasture cows across the road, and night flicks on only a sparse constellation of lights on the neighboring hillsides; behind the estate, where the someday plans show the shopping center and the neat little park, spreads a square mile and who knows how many centuries of wood.

Move closer, follow the three children scrambling over the thin membrane of brick and mortar that holds the wood back from the semi-ds. Their bodies have the perfect economy of latency; they are streamlined and unselfconscious, pared to light flying machines. White tattoos—lightning bolt, star, A—flash where they cut Band-Aids into shapes and let the sun brown around them. A flag of white-blond hair flies out: toehold, knee on the wall, up and over and gone.

The wood is all flicker and murmur and illusion. Its silence is a pointillist conspiracy of a million tiny noises—rustles, flurries, nameless truncated shrieks; its emptiness teems with secret life, scurrying just beyond the corner of your eye. Careful: bees zip in and out of cracks in the leaning oak; stop to turn any stone and strange larvae will wriggle irritably, while an earnest thread of ants twines up your ankle. In the ruined tower, someone's abandoned stronghold, nettles thick as your wrist seize between the stones, and at dawn rabbits bring their kittens out from the foundations to play on ancient graves.

These three children own the summer. They know the wood as surely as they know the microlandscapes of their own grazed knees; put them down blindfolded in any dell or clearing and they could find their way out without putting a foot wrong. This is their territory, and they rule it wild and lordly as young animals; they scramble through its trees and hide-and-seek in its hollows all the endless day long, and all night in their dreams.

They are running into legend, into sleepover stories and nightmares parents never hear. Down the faint lost paths you would never find alone, skidding round the tumbled stone walls, they stream calls and shoelaces behind them like comet-trails. And who is it waiting on the riverbank with his hands in the willow branches, whose laughter tumbles swaying from a branch high above, whose is the face in the undergrowth in the corner of your eye, built of light and leaf-shadow, there and gone in a blink?

These children will not be coming of age, this or any other summer. This August will not ask them to find hidden reserves of strength and courage as they confront the complexity of the adult world and come away sadder and wiser and bonded for life. This summer has other requirements for them.

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What I warn you to remember is that I am a detective. Our relationship with truth is fundamental but cracked, refracting confusingly like fragmented glass. It is the core of our careers, the endgame of every move we make, and we pursue it with strategies painstakingly constructed of lies and concealment and every variation on deception. The truth is the most desirable woman in the world and we are the most jealous lovers, reflexively denying anyone else the slightest glimpse of her. We betray her routinely, spending hours and days stupor-deep in lies, and then turn back to her holding out the lover's ultimate Möbius strip: *But I only did it because I love you so much.*

I have a pretty knack for imagery, especially the cheap, facile kind. Don't let me fool you into seeing us as a bunch of parfit gentil knights galloping off in doublets after Lady Truth on her white palfrey. What we do is crude, crass and nasty. A girl gives her boyfriend an alibi for the evening when we suspect him of robbing a north-side Centra and stabbing the clerk. I flirt with her at first, telling her I can see why he would want to stay home when he's got her; she is peroxided and greasy, with the flat, stunted features of generations of malnutrition, and privately I am thinking that if I were her boyfriend I would be relieved to trade her even for a hairy cellmate named Razor. Then I tell her we've found marked bills from the till in his classy white tracksuit bottoms, and he's claiming that she went out that evening and gave them to him when she got back.

I do it so convincingly, with such delicate crosshatching of discomfort and compassion at her man's betrayal, that finally her faith in four shared years disintegrates like a sand castle and through tears and snot, while her man sits with my partner in the next interview room saying nothing except "Fuck off, I was home with Jackie," she tells me everything from the time he left the house to the details of his sexual shortcomings. Then I pat her gently on the shoulder and give her a tissue and a cup of tea, and a statement sheet.

This is my job, and you don't go into it—or, if you do, you don't last—without some natural affinity for its priorities and demands. What I am telling you, before you begin my story, is this—two things: I crave truth. And I lie.

This is what I read in the file, the day after I made detective. I will come back to this story again and again, in any number of different ways. A poor thing, possibly, but mine own: this is the only story in the world that nobody but me will ever be able to tell.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, August 14, 1984, three children—Germaine ("Jamie") Elinor Rowan, Adam Robert Ryan and Peter Joseph Savage, all aged twelve—were playing in the road where their houses stood, in the small County Dublin town of Knocknaree. As it was a hot, clear day, many residents were in their gardens, and numerous witnesses saw the children at various times during the afternoon, balancing along the wall at the end of the road, riding their bicycles and swinging on a tire swing.

Knocknaree was at that time very sparsely developed, and a sizable wood adjoined the estate, separated from it by a five-foot wall. Around 3:00 p.m., the three children left their bicycles in the Savages' front garden, telling Mrs. Angela Savage—who was in the garden hanging washing on the line—that they were going to play in the wood. They did this often and knew that part of the wood well, so Mrs. Savage was not worried that they would become lost. Peter had a wristwatch, and she told him to be home by 6:30 for his tea. This conversation was confirmed by her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Mary Therese Corry, and several witnesses saw the children climbing over the wall at the end of the road and going into the wood.

When Peter Savage had not returned by 6:45 his mother called around to the mothers of the other two children, assuming he had gone to one of their houses. None of the children had returned. Peter Savage was normally reliable, but the parents did not at that point become worried; they assumed that the children had become absorbed in a game and forgotten to check the time. At approximately five minutes to seven, Mrs. Savage went around to the wood by the road, walked a little way in and called the children. She heard no answer and neither saw nor heard anything to indicate any person was present in the wood.

She returned home to serve tea to her husband, Mr. Joseph Savage, and

their four younger children. After tea, Mr. Savage and Mr. John Ryan, Adam Ryan's father, went a little further into the wood, called the children and again received no response. At 8:25, when it was beginning to grow dark, the parents became seriously worried that the children might have become lost, and Miss Alicia Rowan (Germaine's mother, a single parent), who had a telephone, rang the police.

A search of the wood began. There was at this point some fear that the children might have run away. Miss Rowan had decided that Germaine was to go to boarding school in Dublin, remaining there during the week and returning to Knocknaree at weekends; she had been scheduled to leave two weeks later, and all three children had been very upset at the thought of being separated. However, a preliminary search of the children's rooms revealed that no clothing, money or personal items appeared to be missing. Germaine's piggy bank, in the form of a Russian doll, contained £5.85 and was intact.

At 10:20 p.m. a policeman with a torch found Adam Ryan in a densely wooded area near the center of the wood, standing with his back and palms pressed against a large oak tree. His fingernails were digging into the trunk so deeply that they had broken off in the bark. He appeared to have been there for some time but had not responded to the searchers' calling. He was taken to hospital. The Dog Unit was called in and tracked the two missing children to a point not far from where Adam Ryan had been found; there the dogs became confused and lost the scent.

When I was found I was wearing blue denim shorts, a white cotton T-shirt, white cotton socks and white lace-up running shoes. The shoes were heavily bloodstained, the socks less heavily. Later analysis of the staining patterns showed that the blood had soaked through the shoes from the inside outwards; it had soaked through the socks, in lesser concentrations, from the outside in. The implication was that the shoes had been removed and blood had spilled into them; some time later, when it had begun to coagulate, the shoes had been replaced on my feet, thus transferring blood to the socks. The T-shirt showed four parallel tears, between three and five inches in length, running diagonally across the back from the mid-left shoulder blade to the right back ribs.

I was uninjured except for some minor scratches on my calves, splinters (later found to be consistent with the wood of the oak tree) under my fingernails, and a deep abrasion on each kneecap, both beginning to form scabs. There was some uncertainty as to whether the grazes had been made

in the wood or not, as a younger child (Aideen Watkins, aged five) who had been playing in the road stated that she had seen me fall from a wall earlier that day, landing on my knees. However, her statement varied with retelling and was not considered reliable. I was also near-catatonic: I made no voluntary movement for almost thirty-six hours and did not speak for a further two weeks. When I did, I had no memory of anything between leaving home that afternoon and being examined in the hospital.

The blood on my shoes and socks was tested for ABO type—DNA analysis was not a possibility in Ireland in 1984—and found to be type A positive. My blood was also found to be type A positive; however, it was judged to be unlikely that the abrasions on my knees, although deep, could have drawn enough blood to cause the heavy soaking in the running shoes. Germaine Rowan's blood had been tested prior to an appendectomy two years earlier, and her records showed that she was also A positive. Peter Savage, though no blood type was on record for him, was eliminated as the source of the stains: both his parents were found to be type O, making it impossible that he could be anything else. In the absence of conclusive identification, investigators could not eliminate the possibility that the blood had come from a fourth individual, nor the possibility that it originated from multiple sources.

The search continued throughout the night of August 14 and for weeks thereafter—teams of volunteers combed the nearby fields and hills, every known bog hole and bog drain in the area was explored, divers searched the river that ran through the wood—with no result. Fourteen months later, Mr. Andrew Raftery, a local resident walking his dog in the wood, spotted a wristwatch in the undergrowth about two hundred feet from the tree where I had been found. The watch was distinctive—the face showed a cartoon of a footballer in action, and the second-hand was tipped with a football—and Mr. and Mrs. Savage identified it as having belonged to their son Peter. Mrs. Savage confirmed that he had been wearing it on the afternoon of his disappearance. The watch's plastic strap appeared to have been torn from the metal face with some force, possibly by catching on a low branch when Peter was running. The Technical Bureau identified a number of partial fingerprints on the strap and face; all were consistent with prints found on Peter Savage's belongings.

Despite numerous police appeals and a high-profile media campaign, no other trace of Peter Savage and Germaine Rowan was ever found.

. . .

I became a policeman because I wanted to be a Murder detective. My time in training and in uniform—Templemore College, endless complicated physical exercises, wandering around small towns in a cartoonish Day-Glo jacket, investigating which of the three unintelligible local delinquents had broken Mrs. McSweeney's garden-shed window—all felt like an embarrassing daze scripted by Ionesco, a trial by tedium I had to endure, for some dislocated bureaucratic reason, in order to earn my actual job. I never think about those years and cannot remember them with any clarity. I made no friends; to me my detachment from the whole process felt involuntary and inevitable, like the side effect of a sedative drug, but the other cops read it as deliberate superciliousness, a studied sneer at their solid rural backgrounds and solid rural ambitions. Possibly it was. I recently found a diary entry from college in which I described my classmates as "a herd of mouth-breathing fucktard yokels who wade around in a miasma of cliché so thick you can practically smell the bacon and cabbage and cow shite and altar candles." Even assuming I was having a bad day, I think this shows a certain lack of respect for cultural differences.

When I made the Murder squad, I had already had my new work clothes—beautifully cut suits in materials so fine they felt alive to your fingers, shirts with the subtlest of blue or green pinstripes, rabbit-soft cashmere scarves—hanging in my wardrobe for almost a year. I love the unspoken dress code. It was one of the things that first fascinated me about the job—that and the private, functional, elliptical shorthand: latents, trace, Forensics. One of the Stephen King small towns where I was posted after Templemore had a murder: a routine domestic-violence incident that had escalated beyond even the perpetrator's expectations, but, because the man's previous girlfriend had died in suspicious circumstances, the Murder squad sent down a pair of detectives. All the week they were there, I had one eye on the coffee machine whenever I was at my desk, so I could get my coffee when the detectives got theirs, take my time adding milk and eavesdrop on the streamlined, brutal rhythms of their conversation: when the Bureau comes back on the tox, once the lab IDs the serrations. I started smoking again so I could follow them out to the car park and smoke a few feet from them, staring blindly at the sky and listening. They would give me brief unfocused smiles, sometimes a flick of a tarnished Zippo, before dismissing me with the

slightest angle of a shoulder and going back to their subtle, multidimensional strategies. *Pull in the ma first, then give him an hour or two to sit at home worrying about what she's saying, then get him back in. Set up a scene room but just walk him through it, don't give him time for a good look.*

Contrary to what you might assume, I did not become a detective on some quixotic quest to solve my childhood mystery. I read the file once, that first day, late on my own in the squad room with my desk lamp the only pool of light (forgotten names setting echoes flicking like bats around my head as they testified in faded Biro that Jamie had kicked her mother because she didn't want to go to boarding school, that "dangerous-looking" teenage boys spent evenings hanging around at the edge of the wood, that Peter's mother once had a bruise on her cheekbone), and then never looked at it again. It was these arcana I craved, these near-invisible textures like a Braille legible only to the initiated. They were like thoroughbreds, those two Murder detectives passing through Ballygobackwards; like trapeze artists honed to a sizzling shine. They played for the highest stakes, and they were experts at their game.

I knew that what they did was cruel. Humans are feral and ruthless; this, this watching through cool intent eyes and delicately adjusting one factor or another till a man's fundamental instinct for self-preservation cracks, is savagery in its most pure, most polished and most highly evolved form.

We heard about Cassie days before she joined the squad, probably before she even got the offer. Our grapevine is ridiculously, old-ladyishly efficient. Murder is a high-pressure squad and a small one, only twenty permanent members, and under any added strain (anyone leaving, anyone new, too much work, too little work), it tends to develop a tinge of cabin-fevery hysteria, full of complicated alliances and frantic rumors. I am usually well out of the loop, but the Cassie Maddox buzz was loud enough that even I picked up on it.

For one thing she was a woman, which caused a certain amount of poorly sublimated outrage. We are all well trained to be horrified by the evils of prejudice, but there are deep stubborn veins of nostalgia for the 1950s (even among people my age; in much of Ireland the fifties didn't end until 1995, when we skipped straight to Thatcher's eighties), when you could scare a suspect into confession by threatening to tell his mammy and the only foreigners in the country were med students and work was the one place where you were

safe from nagging females. Cassie was only the fourth woman Murder had taken on, and at least one of the others had been a huge mistake (a deliberate one, according to some people) who had entered squad lore when she nearly got herself and her partner killed by freaking out and throwing her gun at a cornered suspect's head.

Also, Cassie was only twenty-eight and only a few years out of Templemore. Murder is one of the elite squads, and nobody under thirty gets taken on unless his father is a politician. Generally you have to spend a couple of years as a floater, helping out wherever someone is needed for legwork, and then work your way up through at least one or two other squads. Cassie had less than a year in Drugs under her belt. The grapevine claimed, inevitably, that she was sleeping with someone important, or alternatively that she was someone's illegitimate daughter, or—with a touch more originality—that she had caught someone important buying drugs and this job was a payoff for keeping her mouth shut.

I had no problem with the idea of Cassie Maddox. I had been in Murder only a few months, but I disliked the New Neanderthal locker-room overtones, competing cars and competing aftershaves and subtly bigoted jokes justified as "ironic," which always made me want to go into a long pedantic lecture on the definition of irony. On the whole I prefer women to men. I also had complicated private insecurities to do with my own place on the squad. I was almost thirty-one and had two years as a floater and two in Domestic Violence, so my appointment was less sketchy than Cassie's, but I sometimes thought the brass assumed I was a good detective in the mindless preprogrammed way that some men will assume a tall, slim, blond woman is beautiful even if she has a face like a hyperthyroid turkey: because I have all the accessories. I have a perfect BBC accent, picked up at boarding school as protective camouflage, and all that colonization takes awhile to wear off: even though the Irish will cheer for absolutely any team playing against England, and I know a number of pubs where I couldn't order a drink without risking a glass to the back of the head, they still assume that anyone with a stiff upper lip is more intelligent, better educated and generally more likely to be right. On top of this I am tall, with a bony, rangy build that can look lean and elegant if my suit is cut just right, and fairly good-looking in an offbeat way. Central Casting would definitely think I was a good detective, probably the brilliant maverick loner who risks his neck fearlessly and always gets his man.

I have practically nothing in common with that guy, but I wasn't sure anyone else had noticed. Sometimes, after too much solitary vodka, I came up with vivid paranoid scenarios in which the superintendent found out I was actually a civil servant's son from Knocknaree and I got transferred to Intellectual Property Rights. With Cassie Maddox around, I figured, people were much less likely to spend time having suspicions about me.

When she finally arrived, she was actually sort of an anticlimax. The lavishness of the rumors had left me with a mental picture of someone on the same TV-drama scale, with legs up to here and shampoo-ad hair and possibly a catsuit. Our superintendent, O'Kelly, introduced her at Monday-morning parade, and she stood up and said something standard about being delighted to join the squad and hoping she'd live up to its high standards; she was barely medium height, with a cap of dark curls and a boyish, slim, square-shouldered build. She wasn't my type—I have always liked girlie girls, sweet, tiny bird-boned girls I can pick up and whirl around in a one-armed hug—but there was something about her: maybe the way she stood, weight on one hip, straight and easy as a gymnast; maybe just the mystery.

"I heard her family are Masons and they threatened to have the squad dissolved if we didn't take her on," said Sam O'Neill, behind me. Sam is a stocky, cheerful, unflappable guy from Galway. I hadn't had him down as one of the people who would get swept up in the rumor tsunami.

"Oh for God's sake," I said, falling for it. Sam grinned and shook his head at me, and slid past me to a seat. I went back to looking at Cassie, who had sat down and propped one foot against the chair in front of her, leaning her notebook on her thigh.

She wasn't dressed like a Murder detective. You learn by osmosis, as soon as you set your sights on the job, that you are expected to look professional, educated, discreetly expensive with just a soupçon of originality. We give the taxpayers their money's worth of comforting cliché. We mostly shop at Brown Thomas, during the sales, and occasionally come into work wearing embarrassingly identical soupçons. Up until then, the wackiest our squad had got was this cretin called Quigley, who sounded like Daffy Duck with a Donegal accent and wore slogan T-shirts (MAD BASTARD) under his suits because he thought he was being daring. When he eventually realized that none of us were shocked, or even remotely interested, he got his mammy to come up for the day and take him shopping at BT.

That first day I put Cassie in the same category. She was wearing combat

trousers and a wine-colored woollen sweater with sleeves that came down past her wrists, and clunky runners, and I put this down as affectation: *Look, I'm too cool for your conventions.* The spark of animosity this ignited increased my attraction to her. There is a side of me that is most intensely attracted to women who annoy me.

I didn't register her very much over the next couple of weeks, except in the general way that you do register any decent-looking woman when you're surrounded by men. She was being shown the ropes by Tom Costello, our resident grizzled veteran, and I was working on a homeless man found battered to death in an alleyway. Some of the depressing, inexorable flavor of his life had leaked over into his death, and it was one of those cases that are hopeless from the start—no leads, nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything, whoever killed him was probably so drunk or high he didn't even remember doing it—so my gung-ho newbie sparkle was starting to look a little patchy. I was also partnered with Quigley, which wasn't working out; his idea of humor was to reenact large segments of *Wallace & Gromit* and then do a Woody Woodpecker laugh to show you they were funny, and it was dawning on me that I'd been teamed up with him not because he would be friendly to the new boy but because nobody else wanted him. I didn't have the time or the energy to get to know Cassie. Sometimes I wonder how long we might have gone on like that. Even in a small squad, there are always people with whom you never get beyond nods and smiles in corridors, simply because your paths never happen to cross anywhere else.

We became friends because of her moped, a cream 1981 Vespa that somehow, in spite of its classic status, reminds me of a happy mutt with some border collie in its pedigree. I call it the Golf Cart to annoy Cassie; she calls my battered white Land Rover the Compensation Wagon, with the odd compassionate remark about my girlfriends, or the Ecomobile when she is feeling bolshie. The Golf Cart chose a viciously wet, windy day in September to break down outside work. I was on my way out of the car park and saw this little dripping girl in a red rain jacket, looking like Kenny out of *South Park,* standing beside this little dripping bike and yelling after a bus that had just drenched her. I pulled over and called out the window, "Could you use a hand?"

She looked at me and shouted back, "What makes you think that?" and then, taking me completely by surprise, started to laugh.

For about five minutes, as I tried to get the Vespa to start, I fell in love

with her. The oversized raincoat made her look about eight, as though she should have had matching Wellies with ladybugs on them, and inside the red hood were huge brown eyes and rain-spiked lashes and a face like a kitten's. I wanted to dry her gently with a big fluffy towel, in front of a roaring fire. But then she said, "Here, let me—you have to know how to twist the thingy," and I raised an eyebrow and said, "The *thingy*? Honestly, *girls*."

I immediately regretted it—I have never been talented at banter, and you never know, she could have been some earnest droning feminist extremist who would lecture me in the rain about Amelia Earhart. But Cassie gave me a deliberate, sideways look, and then clasped her hands with a wet spat and said in a breathy Marilyn voice, "Ohhh, I've always *dreamed* of a knight in shining armor coming along and rescuing little me! Only in my dreams he was good-looking."

What I saw transformed with a click like a shaken kaleidoscope. I stopped falling in love with her and started to like her immensely. I looked at her hoodie jacket and said, "Oh my God, they're about to kill Kenny." Then I loaded the Golf Cart into the back of my Land Rover and drove her home.

She had a studio flat, which is what landlords call a bedsit where there is room to have a friend over, on the top floor of a semi-dilapidated Georgian house in Sandymount. The road was quiet; the wide sash window looked out over rooftops to Sandymount beach. There were wooden bookshelves crammed with old paperbacks, a low Victorian sofa upholstered in a virulent shade of turquoise, a big futon with a patchwork duvet, no ornaments or posters, a handful of shells and rocks and chestnuts on the windowsill.

I don't remember very many specifics about that evening, and according to Cassie neither does she. I can remember some of the things we talked about, a few piercingly clear images, but I could give you almost none of the actual words. This strikes me as odd and, in certain moods, as very magical, linking the evening to those fugue states that over the centuries have been blamed on fairies or witches or aliens, and from which no one returns unchanged. But those lost, liminal pockets of time are usually solitary; there is something about the idea of a shared one that makes me think of twins, reaching out slow blind hands in a gravity-free and wordless space.

I know I stayed for dinner—a studenty dinner, fresh pasta and sauce from

a jar, hot whiskey in china mugs. I remember Cassie opening a huge wardrobe that took up most of one wall, to pull out a towel for me to dry my hair. Someone, presumably her, had slotted bookshelves inside the wardrobe. The shelves were set at odd, off-kilter heights and packed with a wild variety of objects: I didn't get a proper look, but there were chipped enamel saucepans, marbled notebooks, soft jewel-colored sweaters, tumbles of scribbled paper. It was like something in the background of one of those old illustrations of fairy-tale cottages.

I do remember finally asking, "So how did you end up in the squad?" We had been talking about how she was settling in, and I thought I had dropped it in pretty casually, but she gave me a tiny, mischievous smile, as though we were playing checkers and she had caught me trying to distract her from a clumsy move.

"Being a girl, you mean?"

"Actually, I meant being so young," I said, although of course I had been thinking of both.

"Costello called me 'son' yesterday," Cassie said. " 'Fair play to you, son.' Then he got all flustered and stammery. I think he was afraid I'd sue."

"It was probably a compliment, in its own way," I said.

"That's how I took it. He's quite sweet, really." She tucked a cigarette in her mouth and held out her hand; I threw her my lighter.

"Someone told me you were undercover as a hooker and ran into one of the brass," I said, but Cassie just tossed the lighter back to me and grinned.

"Quigley, right? He told me you were an MI6 mole."

"What?" I said, outraged and falling straight into my own trap. "Quigley is a cretin."

"Gee, you think?" she said, and started to laugh. After a moment I joined in. The mole thing bothered me—if anyone actually believed it, they would never tell me anything again—and being taken for English infuriates me to an irrational degree, but I sort of enjoyed the absurd idea of me as James Bond.

"I'm from *Dublin,*" I said. "I got the accent at boarding school in England. And that lobotomized bogger knows it." Which he did; in my first weeks on the squad he had pestered me so monotonously about what an English guy was doing in the Irish police force, like a child poking you in the arm and droning "Why? Why? Why?" that I had finally broken my need-to-know rule and explained the accent. Apparently I should have used smaller words.

"What are you doing working with him?" Cassie asked.

"Quietly losing my mind," I said.

Something, I'm still not sure what, had made up Cassie's mind. She leaned sideways, switching her mug to the other hand (she swears we were drinking coffee by that stage and claims that I only think it was hot whiskey because we drank it so often that winter, but I know, I remember the sharp prongs of a clove on my tongue, the heady steam), and pulled up her top to just under her breast. I was so startled that it took me a moment to realize what she was showing me: a long scar, still red and raised and spidered with stitch marks, curving along the line of a rib. "I got stabbed," she said.

It was so obvious that I was embarrassed nobody had thought of it. A detective wounded on duty gets his or her choice of assignment. I suppose we had overlooked this possibility because normally a stabbing would have practically shorted out the grapevine; we had heard nothing about this.

"Jesus," I said. "What happened?"

"I was undercover in UCD," Cassie said. This explained both the clothes and the information gap—undercover are serious about secrecy. "That's how I made detective so fast: there was a ring dealing on campus, and Drugs wanted to find out who was behind it, so they needed people who could pass for students. I went in as a psychology postgrad. I did a few years of psychology at Trinity before Templemore, so I could talk the talk, and I look young."

She did. There was a specific clarity about her face that I've never seen in anyone else; her skin was poreless as a child's, and her features—wide mouth, high round cheekbones, tilted nose, long curves of eyebrow—made other people's look smudged and blurry. As far as I could tell she never wore makeup, except for a red-tinted lip balm that smelled of cinnamon and made her seem even younger. Few people would have considered her beautiful, but my tastes have always leaned toward bespoke rather than brand name, and I took far more pleasure in looking at her than at any of the busty blond clones whom magazines, insultingly, tell me I should desire.

"And your cover got blown?"

"No," she said, indignant. "I found out who the main dealer was—this brain-dead rich boy from Blackrock, studying business, of course—and I spent months making friends with him, laughing at his crap jokes, proofreading his essays. Then I suggested maybe I could deal to the girls, they'd be less nervous about buying drugs from another woman, right? He liked the

idea, everything was going great, I was dropping hints that maybe it would be simpler if I met the supplier myself instead of getting the stuff through him. Only then Dealer Boy started snorting a little too much of his own speed—this was in May, he had exams coming up. He got paranoid, decided I was trying to take over his business and stabbed me." She took a sip of her drink. "Don't tell Quigley, though. The operation's still going on, so I'm not supposed to talk about it. Let the poor little fucker enjoy his illusions."

I was secretly terribly impressed, not only by the stabbing (after all, I told myself, it wasn't as though she had done something outstandingly brave or intelligent; she had just failed to dodge fast enough), but by the dark, adrenaline-paced thought of undercover work and by the utter casualness with which she told the story. Having worked hard to perfect an air of easy indifference, I recognize the real thing when I see it.

"Jesus," I said again. "I bet he got a good going-over when they brought him in." I've never hit a suspect—I find there's no need to, as long as you make them think you might—but there are guys who do, and anyone who stabs a cop is likely to pick up a few bruises en route to the station.

She cocked an eyebrow at me, amused. "They didn't. That would've wrecked the whole operation. They need him to get to the supplier; they just started over with a new undercover."

"But don't you want him taken down?" I said, frustrated by her calm and by my own creeping sense of naïveté. "He *stabbed* you."

Cassie shrugged. "After all, if you think about it, he had a point: I *was* only pretending to be his friend to screw him over. And he was a strung-out drug dealer. That's what strung-out drug dealers do."

After that my memory grows hazy again. I know that, determined to impress her in my turn, and never having been stabbed or involved in a shootout or anything, I told her a long and rambling and mostly true story about talking down a guy who was threatening to jump off the roof of a block of flats with his baby, back when I was in Domestic Violence (really, I think I must have been a little drunk: another reason I'm so sure we had hot whiskey). I remember a passionate conversation about Dylan Thomas, I think, Cassie kneeling up on the sofa and gesturing, her cigarette burning away forgotten in the ashtray. Bantering, smart but tentative as shy circling children, both of us checking covertly after each riposte to make sure we hadn't crossed any line or hurt any feelings. Firelight and the Cowboy Junkies, Cassie singing along in a sweet rough undertone.

"The drugs you got from Dealer Boy," I said, later. "Did you actually sell them to students?"

Cassie got up to put on the kettle. "Occasionally," she said.

"Didn't that bother you?"

"Everything about undercover bothered me," Cassie said. "Everything."

When we went into work the next morning we were friends. It really was as simple as that: we planted seeds without thinking, and woke up to our own private beanstalk. At break time I caught Cassie's eye and mimed a cigarette, and we went outside to sit cross-legged at either end of a bench, like bookends. At the end of the shift she waited for me, bitching to the air about how long I took to get my things together ("It's like hanging out with Sarah Jessica Parker. Don't forget your lip liner, sweetie, we don't want the chauffeur to have to go back for it again"), and said "Pint?" on the way down the stairs. I can't explain the alchemy that transmuted one evening into the equivalent of years held lightly in common. The only way I can put it is that we recognized, too surely even for surprise, that we shared the same currency.

As soon as she finished learning the ropes with Costello, we partnered up. O'Kelly put up a bit of a fight—he didn't like the idea of two shiny new rookies working together, and it meant he would have to find something else to do with Quigley—but I had, by sheer luck rather than shrewd detection, found someone who had heard someone bragging about killing the homeless guy, so I was in O'Kelly's good books, and I took full advantage of it. He warned us that he would give us only the simplest cases and the no-hopers, "nothing that needs real detective work," and we nodded meekly and thanked him again, aware that murderers aren't considerate enough to ensure that the complex cases come up in strict rotation. Cassie moved her stuff to the desk beside mine, and Costello got stuck with Quigley and gave us sad reproachful looks for weeks, like a martyred Labrador.

Over the next couple of years we developed, I think, a good reputation within the squad. We pulled in the suspect from the alley beating and interrogated him for six hours—although, if you deleted every recurrence of "Ah, fuck, man" from the tape, I doubt it would run over forty minutes—

until he confessed. He was a junkie called Wayne (*"Wayne,"* I said to Cassie, while we were getting him a Sprite and watching him pick his acne in the one-way glass. "Why didn't his parents just tattoo 'Nobody in my family has ever finished secondary school' on his forehead at birth?") and he had beaten up the homeless guy, who was known as Beardy Eddie, for stealing his blanket. After he signed his statement, Wayne wanted to know if he could have his blanket back. We handed him over to the uniforms and told him they would look into it, and then we went back to Cassie's with a bottle of champagne and stayed up talking till six in the morning, and came in to work late and sheepish and still a little giggly.

We went through the predictable process where Quigley and a few of the others spent awhile asking me whether I was shagging her and whether, if so, she was any good; once it dawned on them that I genuinely wasn't, they moved on to her probable dykehood (I have always considered Cassie to be very clearly feminine, but I could see how, to a certain kind of mind, the haircut and the lack of makeup and the boys'-department corduroys would add up to Sapphic tendencies). Cassie eventually got bored of this and tidied things up by appearing at the Christmas party with a strapless black velvet cocktail dress and a bullishly handsome rugby player named Gerry. He was actually her second cousin and happily married, but he was heartily protective of Cassie and had no objection to gazing adoringly at her for an evening if it would smooth her career path.

After that, the rumors faded and people more or less left us to our own devices, which suited us both. Contrary to appearances, Cassie is not a particularly social person, any more than I am; she is vivacious and quick with banter and can talk to anyone, but given the choice, she preferred my company to that of a big group. I slept on her sofa a lot. Our solve rate was good and rising; O'Kelly stopped threatening to split us up every time we were late turning in paperwork. We were in the courtroom to see Wayne found guilty of manslaughter ("Ah, *fuck,* man"). Sam O'Neill drew a deft little caricature of the two of us as Mulder and Scully (I still have it, somewhere) and Cassie stuck it to the side of her computer, next to a bumper sticker that said BAD COP! NO DOUGHNUT!

In retrospect, I think Cassie came along at just the right time for me. My dazzling, irresistible outsider's vision of the Murder squad had not included things like Quigley, or gossip, or interminable circular interrogations of junkies with six-word vocabularies and dentist's-drill accents. I had pictured

a tensile, heightened mode of existence, everything small and petty bush-fired away by a readiness so charged it snapped sparks, and the reality had left me bewildered and let down, like a child opening a glittering Christmas present and finding woolly socks inside. If it hadn't been for Cassie, I think I might have ended up turning into that detective on *Law & Order,* the one who has ulcers and thinks everything is a government conspiracy.

2

We caught the Devlin case on a Wednesday morning in August. It was, according to my notes, 11:48, so everyone else was out getting coffee. Cassie and I were playing Worms on my computer.

"Ha," said Cassie, sending one of her worms bopping over to mine with a baseball bat and thwacking him off a cliff. My worm, Groundsweeper Willy, yelled, "Och, ye big mammy's boy!" at me on his way down towards the ocean.

"I let you do that," I told her.

"Course you did," said Cassie. "No real man could actually be beaten by a little girl. Even the worm knows it: only a raisin-balled, testosterone-free cream puff could—"

"Fortunately I'm secure enough in my masculinity that I don't feel remotely threatened by—"

"Shh," said Cassie, turning my face back towards the monitor. "Nice boy. Shush, look pretty and play with your worm. God knows nobody else is going to."

"I think I'll transfer somewhere nice and peaceful, like ERU," I said.

"ERU needs fast response times, sweetie," Cassie said. "If it takes you half an hour to decide what to do with an imaginary worm, they're not gonna want you in charge of hostages."

At that point O'Kelly banged into the squad room and demanded, "Where is everyone?" Cassie hit Alt-Tab fast; one of her worms was named O'Smelly and she had been purposefully sending him into hopeless situations, to watch him get blown up by exploding sheep.

"Break," I said.

"Bunch of archaeologists found a body. Who's up?"

"We'll have it," said Cassie, shoving her foot off my chair so that hers shot back to her own desk.

"Why us?" I said. "Can't the pathologist deal with it?"

Archaeologists are required by law to call the police if they find human remains at a depth of less than nine feet below ground level. This is in case some genius gets the idea of concealing a murder by burying the corpse in a fourteenth-century graveyard and hoping it gets marked down as medieval. I suppose they figure that anyone who has the enterprise to dig down more than nine feet without getting spotted deserves a little leeway for sheer dedication. Uniforms and pathologists get called out fairly regularly, when subsidence and erosion have brought a skeleton close to the surface, but usually this is only a formality; it's relatively simple to distinguish between modern and ancient remains. Detectives are called only in exceptional circumstances, usually when a peat bog has preserved flesh and bone so perfectly that the body has all the clamoring immediacy of a fresh corpse.

"Not this time," said O'Kelly. "It's modern. Young female, looks like murder. Uniforms asked for us. They're only in Knocknaree, so you won't need to stay out there."

Something strange happened to my breath. Cassie stopped shoving things into her satchel and I felt her eyes flick to me for a split second. "Sir, I'm sorry, we really can't take on another full murder investigation right now. We're bang in the middle of the McLoughlin case and—"

"That didn't bother you when you thought this was just an afternoon off, Maddox," said O'Kelly. He dislikes Cassie for a series of mind-numbingly predictable reasons—her sex, her clothes, her age, her semiheroic record—and the predictability bothers her far more than the dislike. "If you had time for a day out down the country, you have time for a serious murder investigation. The Tech Bureau are already on their way." And he left.

"Oh, shit," said Cassie. "Oh, shit, the little wanker. Ryan, I'm so sorry. I just didn't think—"

"It's fine, Cass," I said. One of the best things about Cassie is that she knows when to shut up and leave you alone. It was her turn to drive, but she picked out my favorite unmarked—a '98 Saab that handles like a dream—and threw me the keys. In the car, she dug her CD holder out of her satchel and passed it to me; driver chooses the music, but I tend to forget to bring any. I picked the first thing that looked as if it had a hard pounding bass, and turned it up loud.

I hadn't been to Knocknaree since that summer. I went to boarding school a few weeks after Jamie should have gone—not the same school; one in Wiltshire, as far away as my parents could afford—and when I came back

at Christmas we lived in Leixlip, out on the other side of Dublin. Once we hit the highway, Cassie had to dig out the map and find the exit, then navigate us down potholed side roads edged with long grass, hedges grown wild and scraping at the windows.

Obviously, I have always wished I could remember what happened in that wood. The very few people who know about the whole Knocknaree thing invariably suggest, sooner or later, that I should try hypnotic regression, but for some reason I find the idea distasteful. I'm deeply suspicious of anything with a whiff of the New Age about it—not because of the practices themselves, which as far as I can tell from a safe distance may well have a lot to them, but because of the people who get involved, who always seem to be the kind who corner you at parties to explain how they discovered that they are survivors and deserve to be happy. I worry that I might come out of hypnosis with that sugar-high glaze of self-satisfied enlightenment, like a seventeen-year-old who's just discovered Kerouac, and start proselytizing strangers in pubs.

The Knocknaree site was a huge field set on a shallow slope, down the side of a hill. It was stripped to bare earth, churned up by purposeful, indecipherable archaeological scribblings—trenches, giant anthills of soil, Portakabins, scattered fragments of rough stone wall like outlines for some lunatic maze—that made it surreal, postnuclear. It was bordered on one side by a thick stand of trees, on another by a wall, tidy gables peeking over it, that ran from the trees to the road. Towards the top of the slope, near the wall, techs were clustered around something cordoned off by blue-and-white crime-scene tape. I probably knew every one of them, but the context translated them—white coveralls, busy gloved hands, nameless delicate instruments—into something alien and sinister and possibly CIA-related. The one or two identifiable objects looked picture-book solid and comforting: a low whitewashed cottage just off the road, with a black-and-white sheepdog stretched in front of it, paws twitching; a stone tower covered in ivy that rippled like water in the breeze. Light fluttered off the dark slice of a river cutting across one corner of the field.

runner heels dug into the earth of the bank, leaf-shadows dappling a red T-shirt, fishing-rods of branches and string, slapping at midges: Shut up! You'll scare the fish!—

This field was where the wood had been, twenty years ago. The strip of trees was what was left of it. I had lived in one of the houses beyond the wall.

I had not expected this. I don't watch Irish news; it always morphs into a migraine blur of identical sociopath-eyed politicians mouthing meaningless white noise, like the gibber you get when you play a 33-rpm record at 45. I stick to foreign news, where distance gives enough simplification for the comforting illusion that there is some difference between the various players. I had known, by vague osmosis, that there was an archaeological site somewhere around Knocknaree and that there was some controversy about it, but I hadn't picked up the details, or the exact location. I had not been expecting this.

I parked on the shoulder across the road from the Portakabin cluster, between the bureau van and a big black Merc—Cooper, the forensic pathologist. We got out of the car and I stopped to check my gun: clean, loaded, safety on. I wear a shoulder holster; anywhere more obvious feels gauche, a legal equivalent of flashing. Cassie says fuck gauche, when you are five foot five and young and female a little blatant authority isn't a bad thing, and wears a belt. Often the discrepancy works for us: people don't know who to worry about, the little girl with the gun or the big guy apparently without, and the distraction of deciding keeps them off balance.

Cassie leaned against the car and dug her smokes out of her satchel. "Want one?"

"No, thanks," I said. I went over my harness, tightened the straps, made sure none of them were twisted. My fingers seemed thick and clumsy, detached from my body. I did not want Cassie to point out that, whoever this girl was and whenever she had been killed, it was unlikely that the murderer was skulking behind a Portakabin needing to be taken at gunpoint. She tipped her head back and blew smoke up into the branches overhead. It was your basic Irish summer day, irritatingly coy, all sun and skidding clouds and jackknifing breeze, ready at any second to make an effortless leap into bucketing rain or blazing sun or both.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get into character." Cassie put out her smoke on the sole of her shoe and tucked the butt back into the packet, and we headed across the road.

A middle-aged guy in an unraveling sweater was hovering between the Portakabins, looking lost. He perked up when he saw us.

"Detectives," he said. "You must be the detectives, yes? Dr. Hunt . . . I mean, Ian Hunt. Site director. Where would you like to—well, the office or the body or . . . ? I'm not sure, you know. Protocol and things like that." He was one of those people whom your mind instantly starts turning into a cartoon: scribbled wings and beak and ta-da, Road Runner.

"Detective Maddox, and this is Detective Ryan," Cassie said. "If it's all right, Dr. Hunt, maybe one of your colleagues could give Detective Ryan an overview of the whole site, while you show me the remains?"

Little bitch, I thought. I felt jittery and dazed at the same time, as if I had a massive stone-over and had tried to clear it with way too much caffeine; the light jinking off fragments of mica in the rutted ground looked too bright, tricky and fevered. I was in no mood to be protected. But one of Cassie's and my unspoken rules is that, in public at least, we do not contradict each other. Sometimes one of us takes advantage of it.

"Um . . . yes," said Hunt, blinking at us through his glasses. He somehow gave the impression of constantly dropping things—lined yellow pages, chewed-looking tissues, half-wrapped throat lozenges—even though he wasn't holding anything. "Yes, of course. They're all . . . Well, Mark and Damien usually do the tours, but you see Damien's . . . Mark!" He aimed it in the general direction of the open door of a Portakabin, and I had a fleeting glimpse of a bunch of people crowded around a bare table: army jackets, sandwiches and steaming mugs, clods of earth on the floor. One of the guys tossed down a hand of cards and started disentangling himself from the plastic chairs.

"I told them all, stay in there," said Hunt. "I wasn't sure. . . . Evidence. Footprints and . . . fibers."

"That's perfect, Dr. Hunt," Cassie said. "We'll try to clear the scene and let you get back to work as soon as possible."

"We've only got a few weeks left," said the guy at the Portakabin door. He was short and wiry, with a build that would have looked almost childishly slight under a heavy sweater; he was wearing a T-shirt, though, with muddy combats and Doc Martens, and below the sleeves his muscles were complex and corded as a featherweight's.

"Then you'd better get a move on and show my colleague around," Cassie told him.

"Mark," said Hunt. "Mark, this detective needs a tour. The usual, you know, around the site."

Mark eyed Cassie for another moment, then gave her a nod; she had apparently passed some private test. He moved on to me. He was somewhere in his mid-twenties, with a long fair ponytail and a narrow, foxy face with very green, very intense eyes. Men like him—men who are obviously interested purely in what they think of other people, not in what other people think of them—have always made me violently insecure. They have a kind of gyroscopic certainty that makes me feel bumbling, affected, spineless, in the wrong place in the wrong clothes.

"You'll want wellies," he told me, giving my shoes a sardonic look: QED. His accent had a hard border-country edge. "Spares in the tools shed."

"I'll be fine as I am," I said. I had an idea that archaeological digs involved trenches several feet deep in mud, but I was damned if I was going to spend the morning clumping around after this guy with my suit trailing off ludicrously into someone's discarded wellies. I wanted something—a cup of tea, a smoke, anything that would give me an excuse to sit still for five minutes and figure out how to do this.

Mark raised one eyebrow. "Fair enough. Over this way."

He headed off between the Portakabins without checking whether I was behind him. Cassie, unexpectedly, grinned at me as I followed him—a mischievous *Gotcha!* grin, which made me feel a little better. I scratched my cheek at her, with my middle finger.

Mark took me across the site, along a narrow path between mysterious earthworks and clumps of stones. He walked like a martial artist or a poacher, a long, easy, balanced lope. "Medieval drainage ditch," he said, pointing. A couple of crows shot up from an abandoned wheelbarrow full of dirt, decided we were harmless and went back to picking through the earth. "And that's a Neolithic settlement. This site's been inhabited more or less nonstop since the Stone Age. Still is. See the cottage, that's eighteenth-century. It was one of the places where they planned the 1798 Rebellion." He glanced over his shoulder at me, and I had an absurd impulse to explain my accent and inform him that I was not only Irish but from just around the corner, so there. "The guy who lives there now is descended from the guy who built it."

We had reached the stone tower in the middle of the site. Arrow slits showed through gaps in the ivy, and a section of broken wall sloped down from one side. It looked vaguely, frustratingly familiar, but I couldn't tell

whether this was because I actually remembered it or because I knew I should.

Mark pulled a packet of tobacco out of his combats and started rolling a cigarette. There was masking tape wrapped around both his hands, at the base of the fingers. "The Walsh clan built this keep in the fourteenth century, added a castle over the next couple of hundred years," he said. "This was all their territory, from those hills over there"—he jerked his head at the horizon, high overlapping hills furred with dark trees—"to a bend in the river down beyond that gray farmhouse. They were rebels, raiders. In the seventeenth century they used to ride into Dublin, all the way to the British barracks in Rathmines, grab a few guns, whack the heads off any soldiers they saw, and then leg it. By the time the British got organized to go after them, they'd be halfway back here."

He was the right person to tell the story. I thought of rearing hooves, torchlight and dangerous laughter, the rising pulse of war drums. Over his shoulder I could see Cassie, up by the crime-scene tape, talking to Cooper and taking notes.

"I hate to interrupt you," I said, "but I'm afraid I won't have time for the full tour. I just need a very basic overview of the site."

Mark licked the cigarette paper, sealed his rollie and found a lighter. "Fair enough," he said, and started pointing. "Neolithic settlement, Bronze Age ceremonial stone, Iron Age roundhouse, Viking dwellings, fourteenth-century keep, sixteenth-century castle, eighteenth-century cottage." "Bronze Age ceremonial stone" was where Cassie and the techs were.

"Is the site guarded at night?" I asked.

He laughed. "Nah. We lock the finds shed, obviously, and the office, but anything really valuable goes back to head office right away. And we started locking the tools shed a month or two ago—some of our tools went missing, and we found out the farmers had been using our hoses to water their fields in dry weather. That's it. What's the point of guarding it? In a month it'll all be gone anyway, except for this." He slapped the wall of the tower; something scuttled in the ivy above our heads.

"Why's that?" I asked.

He stared at me, giving it an impressive level of incredulous disgust. "In a month's time," he said, enunciating clearly for me, "the fucking government is going to bulldoze this whole site and build a fucking motorway over

it. They graciously agreed to leave a fucking traffic island for the keep, so they can wank off about how much they've done to preserve our heritage."

I remembered the motorway now, from some news report: a bland politician being shocked at the archaeologists who wanted the taxpayer to pay millions to redesign the plans. I had probably changed the channel at that point. "We'll try not to delay you for too long," I said. "The dog at the cottage: does he bark when people come to the site?"

Mark shrugged and went back to his cigarette. "Not at us, but he knows us. We feed him scraps and all. He might if someone went too near the cottage, specially at night, but probably not for someone up by the wall. Off his territory."

"What about cars—does he bark at them?"

"Did he bark at yours? He's a sheepdog, not a guard dog." He sent out a narrow ribbon of smoke between his teeth.

So the killer could have come to the site from any direction: by road, from the estate, even along the river if he liked making things difficult. "That's all I need for now," I said. "Thanks for your time. If you'll wait with the others, we'll come and update you in just a few minutes."

"Don't walk on anything that looks like archaeology," Mark said, and loped off back to the Portakabins. I headed up the slope towards the body.

The Bronze Age ceremonial stone was a flat, massive block, maybe seven feet long by three wide by three high, chipped from a single boulder. The field around it had been crudely bulldozed away—not too long ago, judging by the way the ground gave under my shoes—but a cushion around the stone had been left untouched, so that it rode high like an island amid the churned earth. On top of it, something flashed blue and white between the nettles and long grass.

It wasn't Jamie. I had more or less known this already—if there had been a chance it might be, Cassie would have come to tell me—but it still blew my mind empty. This girl had long dark hair, one plait thrown across her face. That was all I noticed, at first, the dark hair. It didn't even occur to me that Jamie's body wouldn't have been in this condition.

I had missed Cooper: he was picking his way back towards the road, shaking his foot like a cat on every step. A tech was taking photos, another was dusting the table for prints; a handful of local uniforms were fidgeting and chatting with the morgue guys, over by their stretcher. The grass was scattered with triangular numbered markers. Cassie and Sophie Miller were crouching

beside the stone table, looking at something on the edge. I knew it was Sophie right away; that backboard-straight posture cuts through the anonymous coveralls. Sophie is my favorite crime-scene tech. She is slim and dark and demure, and on her the white shower cap looks like she should be bending over wounded soldiers' beds with cannon fire in the background, murmuring something soothing and giving out sips of water from a canteen. In actual fact, she is quick and impatient and can put anyone from superintendents to prosecutors in their place with a few crisp words. I like incongruity.

"Which way?" I called, at the tape. You don't walk on a crime scene until the Bureau guys say you can.

"Hi, Rob," Sophie shouted, straightening up and pulling down her mask. "Hang on."

Cassie reached me first. "Only been dead a day or so," she said quietly, before Sophie caught up. She looked a little pale around the mouth; kids do that to most of us.

"Thanks, Cass," I said. "Hi, Sophie."

"Hey, Rob. You two still owe me a drink." We had promised to buy her cocktails if she got the lab to fast-track some blood analysis for us, a couple of months before. Since then we'd all been saying, "We have to meet up for that drink," on a regular basis, and never getting around to it.

"Come through for us on this one and we'll buy you dinner as well," I said. "What've we got?"

"White female, ten to thirteen," Cassie said. "No ID. There's a key in her pocket, looks like a house key, but that's it. Her head's smashed in, but Cooper found petechial hemorrhaging and some possible ligature marks on her neck, too, so we'll have to wait for the post for cause of death. She's fully dressed, but it looks like she was probably raped. This one's weird all round, Rob. Cooper says she's been dead somewhere around thirty-six hours, but there's been practically no insect activity, and I don't see how the archaeologists could have missed her if she'd been there all yesterday."

"This isn't the primary scene?"

"No way," Sophie said. "There's no spatter on the rock, not even any blood from the head wound. She was killed somewhere else, probably kept for a day or so and then dumped."

"Find anything?"

"Plenty," she said. "Too much. It looks like the local kids hang out here. Cigarette butts, beer cans, a couple of Coke cans, gum, the ends of three

joints. Two used condoms. Once you find a suspect, the lab can try matching him to all this stuff—which will be a nightmare—but to be honest I think it's just your basic teenage debris. Footprints all over the place. A hair clip. I don't think it was hers—it was shoved right down into the dirt at the base of the stone, and I'd bet it's been there a good while—but you might want to check. It doesn't look like it belonged to some teenager; it's the all-plastic kind, with a plastic strawberry on the end, and you'd usually see them on younger kids."

blond wing lifting

I felt as though I had tilted sharply backwards; I had to stop myself jerking for balance. I heard Cassie say quickly, somewhere on the other side of Sophie, "Probably not hers. Everything she's wearing is blue and white, right down to the hair elastics. This kid coordinated. We'll check it out, though."

"Are you OK?" Sophie asked me.

"I'm fine," I said. "I just need coffee." The joy of the new, hip, happening, double-espresso Dublin is that you can blame any strange mood on coffee deprivation. This never worked in the era of tea, at least not at the same level of street cred.

"I'm going to get him an IV caffeine drip for his birthday," said Cassie. She likes Sophie, too. "He's even more useless without his fix. Tell him about the rock."

"Yeah, we found two interesting things," said Sophie. "There's a rock about this size"—she cupped her hands: about eight inches wide—"that I'm pretty sure is one of the weapons. It was in the grass by the wall. Hair and blood and bone fragments all over one end of it."

"Any prints?" I asked.

"No. A couple of smudges, but they look like they came from gloves. The interesting parts are where it was—up by the wall; could mean he came over it, from the estate, although that could be what we're meant to think—and the fact that he bothered dumping it. You'd think he'd just rinse it and stick it in his garden, rather than carrying it as well as a body."

"Couldn't it have been in the grass already?" I asked. "He might have dropped the body on it, maybe getting her over the wall."

"I don't think so," said Sophie. She was shifting her feet delicately, trying to nudge me towards the stone table; she wanted to get back to work. I looked away. I am not squeamish about bodies, and I was pretty sure I had seen even worse than this one—a toddler, the year before, whose father kicked him

until he basically broke in half—but I still felt weird, light-headed, as though my eyes weren't focusing clearly enough to take in the image. *Maybe I really do need coffee,* I thought. "It was blood-side down. And the grass underneath it is fresh, still alive; the rock hadn't been there long."

"Plus, she wasn't bleeding any more by the time she was brought here," Cassie said.

"Oh, yeah—the other interesting thing," Sophie said. "Come look at this."

I bowed to the inevitable and ducked under the tape. The other techs glanced up and moved back from the stone to give us room. They were both very young, barely more than trainees, and suddenly I thought of how we must look to them: how much older, how aloof, how much more confident in the little arts and negotiations of adulthood. It steadied me somehow, the image of two Murder detectives with their practiced faces giving away nothing, walking shoulder to shoulder and in step towards this dead child.

She was lying curled on her left side, as though she had fallen asleep on the sofa under the peaceful murmurs of adult conversation. Her left arm was flung out over the edge of the rock; her right fell across her chest, the hand bent under at an awkward angle. She was wearing smoke-blue combats, the kind with tags and zippers in peculiar places, and a white T-shirt with a line of stylized cornflowers printed on the front, and white runners. Cassie was right, she had taken trouble: the thick plait trailing across her cheek was secured with a blue silk cornflower. She was small and very slight, but her calf showed taut and muscular where one leg of the combats was rucked up. Ten to thirteen sounded about right: her breasts were just beginning, barely denting the folds of the T-shirt. Blood was caked on her nose and mouth and the tips of her front teeth. The breeze whirled the soft, curling fronds at her hairline.

Her hands were covered in clear plastic bags, tied at the wrists. "Looks like she fought," Sophie said. "A couple of nails were broken off. I wouldn't bet on finding DNA under the others—they look pretty clean—but we should get fibers and trace off her clothes."

For a moment I was dizzied by the impulse to leave her there: shove the techs' hands away, shout at the hovering morgue men to get the hell out. We had taken enough toll on her. All she had left was her death and I wanted to leave her that, that at least. I wanted to wrap her up in soft blankets, stroke back her clotted hair, pull up a duvet of falling leaves and little animals' rustles. Leave her to sleep, sliding away forever down her secret underground

river, while breathing seasons spun dandelion seeds and moon phases and snowflakes above her head. She had tried so hard to live.

"I have that same T-shirt," Cassie said quietly, at my shoulder. "Penney's kids' department." I had seen it on her before, but I knew she wouldn't wear it again. Violated, that innocence was too vast and final to allow any tongue-in-cheek claim of kinship.

"Here's what I wanted to show you," said Sophie briskly. She doesn't approve of either sentimentality or graveyard humor at crime scenes. She says they waste time that should be spent working on the damn case, but the implication is that coping strategies are for wimps. She pointed to the edge of the stone. "Want gloves?"

"I won't touch anything," I said, and crouched in the grass. From this angle I could see that one of the girl's eyes was a slit open, as if she was only pretending to be asleep, waiting for her moment to jump up and yell, *Boo! Fooled you!* A shiny black beetle ticked a methodical path over her forearm.

A groove about a finger wide had been carved around the top of the stone, an inch or two from the edge. Time and weather had worn it smooth, almost glossy, but in one place the maker's handmade chisel had slipped, gouging a chunk out of the side of the groove and leaving a tiny, jagged overhang. A smear of something dark, almost black, clung to the underside.

"Helen here spotted it," Sophie said. The girl tech glanced up and gave me a shy proud smile. "We've swabbed, and it's blood—I'll let you know if it's human. I doubt it has anything to do with our body; her blood had dried by the time she was brought here, and anyway I'd bet this is years old. It could be animal, or it could be from some teenage scrap or whatever, but still, it's interesting."

I thought of the delicate hollow by Jamie's wrist bone, the brown back of Peter's neck bordered by white after a haircut. I could feel Cassie not looking at me. "I don't see how it could be connected," I said. I stood up—it was getting hard to balance on my heels without touching the table—and felt a quick head-rush.

Before we left the site I stood on the little ridge above the girl's body and turned full circle, imprinting an overview of the scene on my mind: trenches, houses, fields, access and angles and alignments. Along the estate wall, a thin rim of trees had been left untouched, presumably to shield the

residents' aesthetic sensibilities from the uncompromisingly archaeological view. One had a broken piece of blue plastic rope heavily knotted around a high branch, a couple of feet dangling. It was frayed and mildewed and implied sinister Gothic history—lynch mobs, midnight suicides—but I knew what it was. It was the remnant of a tire swing.

Though I had come to think of Knocknaree as though it had happened to another and unknown person, some part of me had been here all along. While I doodled in Templemore or sprawled on Cassie's futon, that relentless child had never stopped spinning in crazy circles on a tire swing, scrambling over a wall after Peter's bright head, vanishing into the wood in a flash of brown legs and laughter.

There was a time when I believed, with the police and the media and my stunned parents, that I was the redeemed one, the boy borne safely home on the ebb of whatever freak tide carried Peter and Jamie away. Not any more. In ways too dark and crucial to be called metaphorical, I never left that wood.