

Excerpt from *The Father* (Chapter One)

“Typical Glasgow January night, Rooney,” he says, drawing his head above the coats to look through the ice covered window. “Dreich as sleet, cold as death, and unforgiving as spite. I’m staying put.”

“They’ve delivered your booze,” the Gribben says loud, then low. “That’ll get him up.”

“They’ve delivered your booze.”

“My order’s arrived?” he asks, lowering the coats from his head to reveal his face.

“Appears so.”

Extricating from his humpy, he shimmies his legs out of bed, sits up and shivers. Clicking on the bedside lamp, he turns a previously harmless dark space into a danger zone. Reality kicks in as he pulls his shambling frame onto his legs, lifting a coat or two from the bed to rewrap himself. The lino’s cold on his bare feet. He sits to don a worn pair of sheepskin slippers and straightens his half shape to orient by the lamp, from the light giving shadows, to the chair next to it, where he sits to get his bearings.

Once more, the thunder rumbles. “Do you bloody hear me, Rooney? Are you coming down?”

“She’ll send him away. She’s done it before.”

“Indeed, dear woman. Just detain the man long enough for me to get there.”

Fumbling with his trousers, he finds a crumpled twenty; then, stacking another coat over his shoulders, he shuffles through the sitting room, into the hall, to the door of the flat, exposing only enough skin to turn the key and open it. He pushes back the rolled-up draught-blocking rug with his foot, approaches the top of the stairs, only to realise he’s been fooled. The Gribben is down there, but so is Jackie, his erstwhile colleague in crime, and one time spouse.

“Ah hah, the thought police have arrived.” For Rooney, Detective Chief Inspector Jacqueline Kaminski, Glasgow Pitt Street, appearing there means “Big fuckin’ trouble.”

“Well, Happy New Year to you... hermit,” she says, in that smart-cop-way. ‘Brass neck,’ comes to mind. “No’ answering your phone these days, nor your door intercom?”

“Might’ve done so, had it been a nice kind woman, not an annoying bad-hat like you. Why are you invading my privacy?”

“Privacy? Hibernation, you mean.”

“What I do in the comfort of my own home is my affair.” He rests his elbows on the bannister. “Comfort being a generous term,” he lobs at the Gribben. “Why are you here, Jackie?”

“Just a multi-fuckin’-murder,” she says, staccato style; using profanities matter-of-fact in the way he well remembers.

“Oh. Fine. Cheerio,” he says. He turns away, sweeping his coat around him like a Shakespearian actor’s cloak.

“No’ wanting to hear the gory details?” Jackie nods to the Gribben, knowing she understands her tactic.

“No’ the least bit interested.” He heads back to the flat. It doesn’t stop her though.

“There’s a psycho out there.”

“So what, there’s one here too,” he says towards the Gribben.

“You bring the best out in me,” the Gribben replies, with one of those faces.

“He’s one of yours,” Jackie says.

“Feck-all to do wi’ me.”

“This guy does it in groups.”

“*Groups?*”

“So do swingers...”

“Up on the Cobbler, four stiffs.”

“*Multiple?*”

“An elderly councillor and a good whack of her family.”

“*Interested?*”

“When?”

“Couple of hours ago.”

“It’s no’ my stuff no more.”

“I want you there, wi’ me.”

“*She wants you there, wi’ her.*”

“Jackie, this shrink retired on health grounds, mind?”

“Aye, I mind.”

“Not that our breakup had anything to do with that, oh no.”

“Rooney, we need to get over there. Right?”

There’s no contest between Arrochar and his bed. “I’m ill,” he says.

“Aye, a walking liver disease. Your car’s waiting, *Sir*,” she persists, this woman with no sympathy for his sorry state.

“Better do what she says. She’ll stop your order.”

“What’s that to you,” he says to me. Defeated, he goes back inside, but not before he gives a defiant thrust. “She... ite, be good to get the fuck out of this igloo of an apartment—” He shivers, the coats falling to the floor as he puts on his shirt. “—into a warm bar.” He grunts, struggling with his Docs. “Where I can find some... feckin’... privacy.” The last word ricochets down the stairs.

He sits, takes a breath, and spans the room.

“An aesthetic nightmare, Rooney?”

He raises his eyes.

He has been here since his last high, after hitting rock bottom. All he has of any importance are some self-produced paintings adorning the walls: a tiger, a great white, a mosquito – killers all, remnants of an old hobby and a retreat from a stressful profession. Some scattered books, textbooks mainly, lie across the floor; remnants of a life of Freudian analysis. An old winged-back chesterfield chair, which, like himself, has seen better days. A drained glass lies on the table, flanked by a platoon of empty bottles. They’ll remain standing to attention until his weekly environmental health sojourn, forestalling the invasion of flies, rats... social workers.

A dejected reflection of a man.

“You, Sean Rooney.”

“And you’re nothing but a figment of my tortured imagination. Me, I’m Rooney, get it?”

“You, mine host, are a forty-nine-year-old, divorced, ex-professional man, living in a shitty Partick pied-à-terre, with only a voice for company.”

“I’m a Doctor.”

“Ah, but no’ the medical kind. No’ how the body—”

“I’m a doctor, of the mind, and how it works.”

“And how it doesn’t?”

“I’m a PhD.”

“An erstwhile... failed... psychologist.”

“Fuck off, bastard.” His name for me.

Rooney, psychological adviser, as he was, had the ability to track those who left something of themselves behind: patterns, characteristics, and sometimes clues. Men with distinctive ways and traits; types so dissimilar to their normal fellows, that the broad indiscernible road, in ever diminishing breadths, became a well-worn path.

“You telling them about me?”

“I am. They need to know.”

It wasn't enough for him to find the man and establish who he was, however. He needed to know *why*: why *he* did what he did. So much so it made him sick, sick of it and *him* too. His men fell into similar patterns: been caused pain, will cause pain; been controlled, exploited and manipulated, will control, exploit and manipulate; no one cares for me, I don't care for others; people hate me, I'll hate them back; life hasn't given me anything, I'll take what's mine by right.

His job became a drudge. Then simultaneously, his illness and I arrived, invading him, tormenting him—

“Driving me mad.”

“Making you... bad.”

He had always hoped there would be one in particular, one who would interest him more than the others, but one who could get to him, get into him, damage him. He feared this, but so great his interest – his perverse interest – he... wanted him.

“What you saying?”

“You want him.”

“I want—”

“Him.”

For Rooney, mental illness arrived in his early-forties, just when everything was going well.

“I was on the crest of a wave, wi' the Strathclyde Polis.”

“You hit the skids.”

“I became... ill.” Shoes tied and jacket buttoned, he moseys down towards these sentinels of his sure destruction. *“I am no' up to this,”* he says, pulling his scarf from the coat rack, wrapping it python-like around his neck. *“I just hope you're not taking the piss.”*

“The car's out there, hon,” Jackie says, fearing a last stand at the door. *“Get the fuck into it.”*

“Get into it, hon. Just do it.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” he says, realising the futility of arguing.

“I see you're in your working gear; going begging?” Jackie asks.

“It used to be a white suit.”

“Before it was a tablecloth in a curry house, after a crowd of students ate from it.”

“See your jokes haven't improved.”

The Gribben smirks.

“Sartorial elegance no’ my strong point, Mrs G?” he says, noticing Jackie’s wellies, which have replaced her customary Prada heels.

The Gribben holds open his black Crombie, awaiting his arms, then adds his Derby tweed bunnet, an Oxfam purchase. “I’ve been worried about you,” she says, through cig gripping lips, folding her arms in a wee-washer-wuman-wie.

“I’m alive, alive oh,” he says. “From Dublin’s fair city, where the girls are so pretty – shame about you!”

He gets in the back of the car and pulls the door behind him. A uniform is behind the wheel as a group of weans gather around the car.

“Fame at last Rooney?” Jackie says, turning round.

“Right, dear,” he says. “In this city, polis cars turn incidents into circuses.”

“You’re the incident Rooney, a circus clown.”

“Fuck off and leave me alone.”

“Just like old times... bastard,” Jackie replies.

“Correct.”