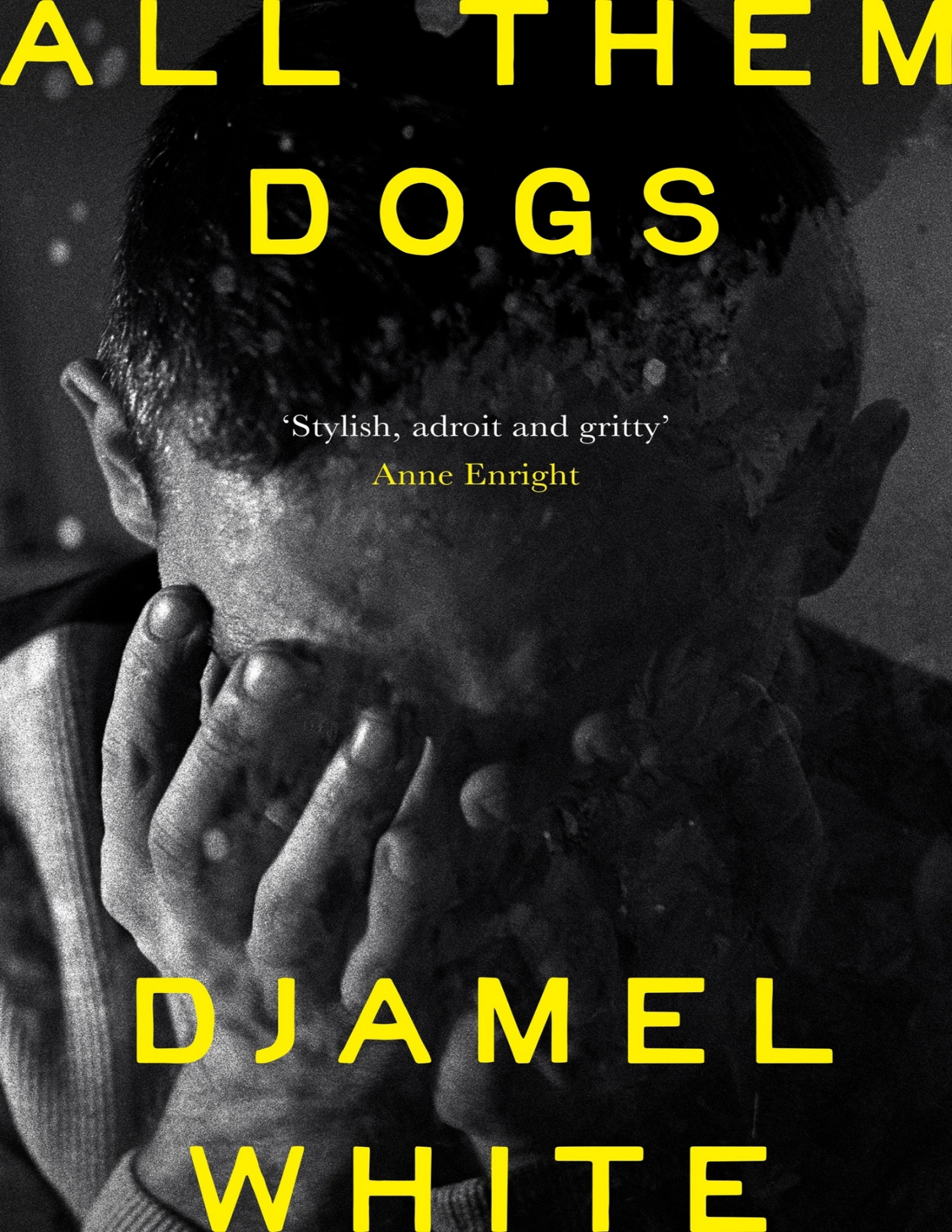




ALL THE M DOGS

‘Stylish, adroit and gritty’

Anne Enright

DJAMEL WHITE

About the Author

Djamel White is an Irish writer from Dublin. He holds an MFA from University College Dublin and is the recipient of a Literature Bursary Award and an Agility Award from the Arts Council of Ireland. *All Them Dogs* is his debut novel.

All Them Dogs

Djamel White

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For Sophie

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First thing you always notice going into a stranger's gaff is the smell. Damp and smoky, that sickly-sweet smell of a spoonful of gear. It paints a picture. Once you've seen one gaff you've seen them all.

I let the Opel roll into the spot in front of the apartment building. One of Finto's fellas coming up short on his dividends, we'd been told.

Made-in-Turkey Finto Maher, with the hairline to his eyebrows and the gnashers like he had the back side of a train ticket stuffed into his mouth. Rough cunt, but weren't we all?

Flute there, stony and quiet in the passenger seat as usual. I was starting to think that he was just an odd bastard with not much more to him. Didn't stop me following his lead, though. Not that I enjoyed being told what to do. I was Wardy. Tony bleeding Ward. Lethal weapon forged in 1997 with a rap sheet that'd put them all to shame. Wild card just waiting for my time in the sun. Let someone else do the thinking. The things you tell yourself.

I knocked the engine off. The Opel was a boxy little hatcher with a baby-blue paint job. A Corsa-A GSI. They don't make them like this any more, and I don't mean the engines. I couldn't give a rat's about what's under the hood, I'm talking about the way this yoke looked. All them straight lines. Cars of its like today look like bubbles. They lack character. The Opel used to be my ma's, but really it'd been mine before it was ever mine. Once I started stealing the keys it wasn't long before she let me have it altogether. First thing I ever owned, and it had been waiting patiently for me in Kenny Boyle's driveway all those years I was away in England.

Flute got out first. This area was the council's abandoned child. They were coming to the rescue all too late, building reams of new gaffs for foreigners to clash with poor Irish locals who'd been left here the whole time listening to the screech of hot motors in the early hours of the morning. What stood was apartments and low-roofed houses, blocky and different-coloured. Big

black streaks of damp down the cream-coloured sections. These buildings were meant to look cheerful, to convince the people who moved in back then that this was a place where they'd be looked after.

The December air was baltic, but my flash new Arc'teryx jacket did well to keep it out. Flute had the fur from the hood of his Canada Goose parka pulled in close to his head. I told him earlier he looked a fucking eejit in it. Paired with those all-black Air Max Pluses, he cut the same shape as half the youngfellas who dealt for chaps like the one we were about to meet, and the ones who like to let on that they did. Outstraight, everyone wanted to look like a real-one but it didn't take much to find out who was only a spoofer these days. Flute would tower over any of those little wannabes anyway, the size of him. The parka was too short for him nearly. I would have sized him up by one, brought him somewhere to take in the extra length so it landed just right on the thighs. His wide shoulders meant his sleeves came up a bit short for my liking too. I wasn't jealous of big lads for that reason. At least I could stay looking sharp no bother to me.

The grey aul day did the place no favours, but it gave a sheen to Flute's blue eyes – like a husky, or one of those pitbulls with the grey-blue coats. One of those dogs that stare at you without so much as a tail wag. The sort that'd make you think twice about reaching your hand out. They were something else to look at, all the same. Gorgeous animals.

I stretched my arms and legs in anticipation. I could feel the buzz around my joints. I followed Flute up the outside staircase to the front door of one of the terraced gaffs, doing a little chicken dance with my arms to loosen up my shoulders. The gaff had another apartment underneath it that wouldn't get any sun on a good day. I'd been in a few gaffs like that in the past, not needing to really know if the sun was up or not so long as there was enough supplies to go around. Back then I was only a messer.

Flute knocked on the door. No answer. It was freezing.

'He's deffo still in bed,' I said. I shoved my hands into my jacket pockets. I saw us both there in the glass, the size difference between us. I thought of that old cartoon, *Pinky and the Brain*. I straightened up to look bigger. I

wasn't a short-arse or anything, but he sure made me look like one. Not far over the way a group of four or five teenagers were watching us and making no effort to hide it. I could hear them muttering to each other.

Flute knocked again. Then he tried the handle of the door and lo and behold, the fucking thing opened.

'Fuck off, no way,' I said, and followed him into the house. The hoods came down.

Smells, like I was saying. Damp first. Like my ma's place whenever we'd spent some time away and there wasn't the heat of us living there to cover it all up. It was a two-storey little dinger of a place, stairs right there as you come in with a narrow little hall shooting down into an open door. A neckless Jack Russell was nosing its way towards us, older than I was by the looks of it.

'Smells like a bando,' I said. The walls inside had the same black damp streaks. I'd seen people selling out of bandos keeping the place in better nick honestly. Sometimes you might know someone in a bit of debt and you might take over their gaff to operate out of, and I'd seen plenty of those places go to shite like this one. But this was this fella's own home. A gaff he got off the council likely for nothing, him raking in the cash, dealing for Finto, and here's his place in absolute bits. When I got a gaff of my own it'd be a palace, outstraight.

Flute bent down to give the dog a scratch before thinking better of it and straightened back up. He stepped over it and we both walked down to the door at the end of the hall. The dog scuttled along behind us. The kitchen we came into was cramped and barely fit both the table and the counter. The scales were there on the table, and a bag of whatever it was he was using for a cutting agent. If he was diluting what Finto was already diluting, then God help the poor fuckers getting sold it. And God help this fella when Finto found out. Bleedin' triple-distilled. Muck.

There was a glass door painted with bird scutter that went out to a little balcony littered with hard-boiled dog shite. Plates smeared with dried

ketchup and half-eaten potato waffles and cigarette ash were stacked on the counter. A box of cereal half bleached white by the sun sat on the windowsill.

‘What sort of reprobates has Finto got working for him?’ I asked.

‘That’s Finto for you,’ said Flute, looking into a kitchen drawer. ‘I’ll be telling Lavelle.’

The big man, Lavelle, who Finto answered to. For once maybe, I would not have liked to be in Finto’s position.

I picked up a jumper from the seat of one of the kitchen chairs and held it up to look at it. ‘BALENCIAGA’ right across the front of it. I waved it at Flute.

‘Dya want this?’ I said.

‘Yeah, to wipe me hole with.’

I tossed it onto the floor. The dog went around me to give it a sniff, its little claws tapping on the lino.

The stairs in the hall went up to a square landing with barely enough room for one of us to stand. We opened one of the doors and it was a child’s bedroom.

Here was in a fucking state too. Toys all over the shop, wooden crib with a few slats missing from it and no child in there to be seen unless it had died and was hidden under all the shite. But you’d smell that, surely. Next door we found the fella we came for, snoozing there in the bed, one and a half empty flagons of cider on the floor. I’m thinking, lightweight. The child in a nappy sleeping beside him. Flute knocked loudly on the open door. The fella rolled around a bit but didn’t wake up. He walked over and poked him on the forehead.

‘Fffuck off,’ went your man. The wince off of Flute said his breath was bad-out.

Flute gave him a shake. Soon as his hands touched him his eyes jerked open.

He screamed, like proper went *AHHH* and all, and that had me snorting. He jolted upright in the bed, the child beside him rolling right off and hitting the carpet with a *thunk*. Straight away it started bawling.

‘Shut him up, Patsy, would you,’ said Flute.

‘For the love of bleedin’ God,’ moaned the fella, sitting up in the bed. ‘Me fuckin’ heart, Darren.’

I noticed the gold chain on his bare chest. It had bits of diamond in it. Then his scalded-red eyes, as far back into the skull as they could go. Something I couldn’t read tattooed on his neck.

‘You’re late, Patsy,’ was all Flute said.

‘So he sends you? Fuck sake, he could have rang me.’

The child was still screaming. Patsy leaned over the side of the bed and scooped him up in a pair of arms covered with shite-looking tattoos. On one arm, a naked, wall-eyed bint with massive tits in that old-school prison style. The other was scribbled with playing cards, dice on fire, a lion that looked more like my ma’s expression after we’d leave piss on the toilet seat. He bounced the little fella up and down on the bed.

‘Give it over, Lucian,’ he said, his hand like a garden trowel slapping its little back.

So that’s what the curling writing on his neck tattoo said: *Lucian*.

I said, ‘His name’s *Lucian*? What is he, a bleedin’ vampire?’

‘Wasn’t my fuckin’ idea,’ Patsy grumbled. ‘Who’s this fella, Darren?’

‘He’s with me,’ said Flute.

‘That doesn’t tell me who the fuck he is, does it?’ said Patsy. He scowled at me. I was giving it loads back and I was fucking loving it, big sneering head on me.

‘Those lads yours outside?’ I asked, thinking of that group of teenies I’d seen standing across the road on our way in.

‘And what?’

‘What’s the oldest you have working for you?’

‘I don’t bleeding know. What’s it to you, working for the social, are you?’

‘Takes me back, is all.’

I didn’t say anything else after. I would have been around their age when I worked for Philly, by the looks of them. Started at sixteen, worked my way

up quick, and then shit hit the fan and I had to cool the jets over in England for a bit. Philly'd never live in a state like this. He knew to be careful with how he spent his money, because of the Criminal Assets crowd and all that, but he at least had some fucking pride of place. He loved his aftershave. He used to send me in with cash to Brown Thomas to pick up bottles of Kilian and Armani and Hugo Boss and he'd always let me choose one to have a spray off before I went back out onto the road, smelling like bleedin' Hollywood. The whole side wall of Patsy's room was nearly floor to ceiling with shoe boxes. He'd a few runners sitting on top of their boxes wrapped in cling-film to keep them fresh, definitely worth a few bob. And that chain on his neck too, I'd say a good snoop would turn out more than enough reason for someone to want to keep their door locked.

Patsy nodded towards his bedside locker.

'It's in the side drawer there.'

Flute opened the drawer. He looked at it for a second and then pulled out a watch.

'That's fake,' said Patsy, too quick to be believed. 'The other drawer.'

Flute dropped the watch back into the drawer. The *thunk* of it hitting the bottom made Patsy wince. He opened the second drawer and pulled out a rake of notes.

'No envelopes?'

'I wasn't anywhere to get any,' said Patsy. Like he wasn't himself down at the post office once a week to draw his dole.

Flute looked at him but said nothing. He started counting it.

'And you'd want to be locking your fucking door behind you and all.'

Patsy grunted something. The kid had stopped screaming. Now it was looking at us with a limp finger in its mouth, as if to say are you going to help me here or what? Look at the state of me, give me a bath. The social would have him before long.

Flute finished counting the cash and put it into the inside pocket of his coat.

'What am I going back to Finto with?'

Patsy rubbed his eyes with his wrist.

‘Whatche mean? It’s all there.’

‘As in what am I saying to him? The fucking state of the place. What’s happening to you?’

‘You know, Darren, I’m in two minds about letting you talk to me like that.’

‘Yeah? Take it up with Finto.’

We left Patsy and his soon-to-be-rehomed child in the bed and headed out to the Opel.

‘He won’t last,’ Flute said as we moved back down the steps towards the car. The little gang of runabouts had grown in number.

I was disappointed, I had been half-hoping it’d kick off. It must have shown on my face.

‘I dunno what you were expecting,’ said Flute over the roof of the car.

I stared back over at him. Something about this fella’s skin, man. Even with the wind it didn’t go all red like everyone else’s. His gaze was like a flashlight that just caught you rapid in the back seat, joint half rolled on your lap. But I made sure I kept looking at them, avoiding the pull of his nose and cheekbones that swooped down to a full mouth that I knew had real, perfect teeth, even though I had never seen him smile. A waste. I’d be cracking safes with a set like that.

‘I dunno what you’re talking about,’ I said. I wasn’t about to let on that I was unsatisfied. I was more than happy for the bit of work. *Head down, Wardy*, I was telling myself. I was nearly always fighting an urge to pop. Philly’s words kept coming back to me: *It’s like finding the bite before you add the revs*. Keep it there and keep it steady.

I looked at Flute as he buckled his seatbelt, then I reversed out without properly looking and nearly hit some little muppet who was flying past on a scrambler.

‘Leave it,’ said Flute, sensing I was about to get out and have words with the little toerag. The noise of the bike’s engine filled my skull. I shook my head and took us out of there, and the Opel left a little cloud of black smoke to hang around after we’d gone.

I swung off a roundabout near Fonthill a little sharp and his body leant into my arm. I could feel the heat of him through two layers of coats. The rev counter went up by a couple hundred.

When we hit the main road through Cherry Orchard he was watching me while we stalled in traffic. I could feel it, and I made sure not to let on. Eyes on the traffic, on the lights, on the used-car dealerships on my side of the road. One hand on the bottom of the wheel, the other rubbing the stubble on my chin waiting to see out of the corner of my eye his head moving to look out the passenger window, at his phone, anywhere but me.

And then I had us rolling into the industrial estate and towards the big warehouse unit with its huge sprawling car park. The words *Lavelle's Combat Emporium* bright-blue on a yellow sign high up near the top of the building. There, in that huge grey warehouse, was the biggest and most infamous boxing gym in Dublin, fact.

The owner, Aengus Lavelle, was a community man, and generally regarded as one tough cunt. He was known for his fundraising matches, his relationships with major property developers and key political figures over the years, and for setting up a string of local Men's Sheds. But he was more famously known for brokering a peace deal with the Finucan cartel before they moved offshore to establish their trafficking empire, making Lavelle the key link between all the major suppliers and the rest of the gangs in the country. If anything was to ever happen to the man, an entire fucking system would collapse in on top of itself. So, when I finally landed back in Dublin and heard one of his top fellas was looking for a bit of help, it was a no-brainer. I had my old pal Kenny Boyle to thank for that. His youngone did boxing lessons here. He'd been letting me stay at his since I'd got back.

Flute was checking his phone as I parked up.

'Am I alright to go?' I said. All I wanted was to get home to Kenny's, zone out and watch YouTube on the big telly. But Flute shook his head.

'He wants to meet you,' he said.

'Deadly,' I said, and straight away I felt I was about to cack myself.

Fanny Lavelle was on the reception desk. She was something like twenty-two, and had a crooked nose and one tooth slightly overlapping the other that she didn't let stop her smiling. She'd have you thinking everything about the place was legit if you were none the wiser, and you'd never have her clocked for the daughter of the man himself. The last few times I'd been here she'd worn the ear off me while I waited for Flute, gathering intel for whatever the fuck purpose she wanted. Maybe she'd been trying to report back to her father, I couldn't tell you at that point, but she had that big crooked smile there waiting for both of us now as we came in.

'There's me boys,' she said. Flute put his hand gently on the desk as he passed, like it was her shoulder. Strands of his hair brushed the top of the flat archway in through to the rest of the gym. I winked at Fanny and followed him. If you were into combat sports and all that, this was heaven. The place was massive. A full-sized boxing-ring in the middle with enough space for a crowd to gather. Big high ceilings with lights that blasted the head off you. There were separate training areas and mats all around the shop with free weights, skipping ropes, sparring areas, you name it. At the far end were the metal stairs that led up to the office door. A wide rectangular window beside it, because the place was originally meant to be a factory or a warehouse or something where the foreman could look down at the whole show.

The youth session was in full swing and the place was screeching with the noise of kids. As if I hadn't heard enough screaming kids for one day. I had my eyes on Flute's back as we passed through, following towards the stairs, watching the up and down of his shoulders as he walked. My head was thumping. I heard a short, high whistle that made me snap my head to the right, and there was Kenny Boyle holding up two boxing pads while his daughter Lizzie pummelled at them. He was grinning. I gave him a wink, like it was all Gucci.

Before I knew it, I was climbing the metal staircase at the far wall behind Flute. I looked down over the gym below, and there was Kenny, looking up at me. He tore one of the boxing pads off his hand using his mouth and gave

me a thumbs-up. The pad dropped from his mouth and landed softly on the ground. Eejit.

In the office there was a pool table off to the right, and a desk straight to the left just under the window cluttered with piles of paper and folders covered with dust. There was a kitchenette along the back wall with a table and chairs, and there was a battered old couch dividing the room, weirdly placed so that it was facing you as you came in.

On that couch, with his legs crossed, sat Aengus Lavelle. He wore a white T-shirt under a blazer. His trousers were cropped at the ankle and he had on some horsebit penny loafers that I knew cost bang on a grand. No socks. Ankles like veined gobstoppers. He might have looked well put together, only nothing could distract from the pure roughness of his face. His skin was littered with the burst blood vessels of a career-drinker. The bags under his eyes were like yellowing lips that would have jiggled if you flicked them. An island of white hair sat near his forehead, where his hairline had receded around it. It was thin and wispy like candy floss from a dusty attic. Bony, loose-skinned hands, fingers covered in signet rings, were holding an iPad on his knee. The glow made his face pale, the wrinkles a deeper black. He hardly glanced up at us as we came in.

‘Darren,’ he said. Voice like nettles. And then, ignoring me, he started to read off the iPad: *‘Man, twenties, killed in local gangland feud. Dated July 2018,’* he said. The theatrics of it. Flute said nothing. I sure as fuck said nothing. He went on:

‘Gardai investigating death of twenty-one-year-old Edward Glackin . . . fatally stabbed in Lucan, County Dublin, last Saturday. Says here: injuries to stomach . . . pronounced dead in Tallaght . . . Gardai appealing for anyone who has information that may assist . . .’ He looked up at us then *‘to come forward . . .’* and he held me in his glare.

‘So, this is your fucking liability,’ he growled.

His mean cunt of an eye trained right at me, bushy-browed, like an owl homing in on a rat. Stick this fella in any flat-roofed pub with an old brown jacket and he’d have been a part of the furniture. But here, dripped out in

designer, you could smell the money. Even Flute didn't seem as tall as before.

'That investigation was abandoned,' Flute said. 'After Phillip Mooney was killed. I looked into it.'

The way he spoke to him. His voice flat and even like it was the easiest thing in the world. Not for the first time I was thinking just who the fuck was this fella I'd been paired up with, and where he'd got the stones.

'It was a mad summer,' I said, desperate now to course correct. 'Lots of feuding.'

'Casualties on both sides.' Lavelle's tone was mocking, something almost flirtatious in it, the way you'd talk to a kitten. Like I was something he wanted to shag or eat, or shag and then eat. It got under my skin. And then for a second I was back at the funeral, standing by Kenny's side, throwing a handful of dirt and a pinner on Philly Mooney's casket.

Lavelle was looking down at the iPad again. He read: 'Another one here: *Gardai appeal for whereabouts of various suspects in Lucan killing . . .* Sound familiar? Did a runner, did you?'

'There were fellas getting clipped all over the place,' I said, 'who in their right mind would stay?'

That's what my ma had told them, when the bacon came knocking. Off I'd fucked, for better or for worse.

'*Various suspects* it says, Aengus,' Flute said. 'Including, right there, Phillip Mooney. Not hard to connect the dots.'

'Tit for tat.'

Lavelle was back looking at me now, and I thought, if I hit him a dig, I'd fold him. My fist would burst through his head like it was papier mâché. And still he scared the bollocks out of me. I looked at Flute for approval, got nothing of the sort, and then back at Lavelle, with his curled lip the image of a snarling Chihuahua.

'Money or protection?' he asked.

'What?' I said.

He rolled his eyes towards Flute. 'Does he want *money* or *protection*?'

Flute just shrugged.

‘Both would be fresh,’ I said, and in the silence that followed Lavelle’s mouth moved silently in the shape of the word *fresh*.

‘One more bleedin’ clown, Darren,’ he said.

Protection was meant to be a perk, not the fucking recompense. I’d be a clown to accept otherwise, especially since I was one body down the chain from the fella everyone else fucking answered to. I’d have liked to see any associate of Eddie Glackin, family or otherwise, try to take a pop at me when they knew who I was working for. Protection was implied by the name alone, it was no skin off this cunt’s back.

Lavelle put the iPad aside and rose up off the couch like a snake out of a basket. He was the reaper in designer clobber, the way the shadows fell inside his eye sockets, the way his thin lips disappeared above those gnashers when he talked.

‘You listen to me now,’ he said. I looked right into the cave of his mouth. ‘Any retribution for acts you carried out outside of this operation are yours and yours alone to deal with.’ He pointed to Flute. ‘You do what this fella says unless I say otherwise. As for any of the other fellas that come through here, you do whatever they say unless he says otherwise.’

I nodded. He didn’t look convinced, but he sucked his teeth and said, ‘I’ll leave him in your hands, Darren.’ He sat back down, crossed his legs, and smoothed out the crease of his trousers. His foot bobbed.

‘Off you fuck now.’

We headed back down the stairs into the gym. Flute slapped me on the back.

I said, ‘How do you bleedin’ manage?’

‘Whatche mean?’ said Flute. ‘That was him in a good mood.’

The youth session was over and the gym was slowly emptying out. The sun was lower in the sky when we got out into the car park. Flute sparked up a smoke. I felt the sting of the cold in the arse-cracks of my fingers.