

ANDY

‘We know you’re a cop,’ Matt said.

Andrea had been waiting for those words. All the way out to the forest, as they pulled off the highway and onto the thin dirt road. The unsteady headlights between Matt’s and Engo’s shoulders cast the trees in a strangely festive gold. The killing fields. In a way, Andy had been waiting for the words a lot longer than that. Every morning and every night for almost three months. The potential of them clinging to the lining of her stomach like an acid.

We know.

Now she was kneeling on the bare boards of a run-down portable building in the woods, the sound of boats on the Hudson nearby competing with the moan of skin-peeling wind. The corrugated-iron roof rattled above all their heads. The property – a massive, abandoned slab of woods that probably belonged to some absent billionaire who’d had ideas of building a house here once – was dead silent beyond the little shack. Andy knew she was in a black spot on the river’s otherwise glittering edges, so close to safety, yet so far away. Ben was breathing hard beside Andy, sweating into his firefighting

bunker uniform. The reflective yellow stripes on his arms were trying to suck up any and all available light. There wasn't much. Matt, Engo and Jake were faceless silhouettes crowding her and Ben in. Strange what a person will long for at the end. A sliver of light. To breathe the sour air unfettered, as Ben did. They'd taped her mouth.

Matt put his gun to Ben's forehead, nudged it hard so that his head snapped back.

'You brought a *fucking cop* into the crew.'

'She's not a cop! I swear to god, man!'

'I *raised* you,' Matt growled. 'I found you in a hole and I dug you out and this is how you want to play me?'

'Matt, Matt, listen to me—'

'Benji, Benji, Benji.' Engo stepped forward, put his three-fingered hand on Ben's shoulder. 'We *know*. Okay? It's over. You got a choice now, brother. You admit what you've done, and maybe we can talk about what happens next.'

'*She's not a cop!*'

I'm not a fucking cop! Andy growled through the tape. Because it's what she would say. Andrea 'Andy' Nearland, her mask. She wouldn't go down quiet. She would fight to the end.

Engo came over to her and tried to start in with the same faux pleasantries and soothings and bargains. She flopped hard on her hip, swung her legs around and kicked out at his shins. He went down on his ass and she let off a string of obscenities behind the tape. Andy had always hated Engo. Andy the mask. And the real *Her*, too. Jake got between them. Little Jakey, who had until now been hovering in the corner of the dilapidated portable and gnawing on the end of an unlit cigarette, muttering worrisome nothings to himself.

DEVIL'S KITCHEN

'Get her back on her knees.'

Jake approached and helped her up. His hand was clammy on her neck.

Don't fucking touch me!

'Benji,' Big Matt said. 'There's an out here. I'm *giving you* an out. You gotta take it.'

'I don't—'

'Tell us that you turned on us. That's all you have to do, man.'

'She's not a cop!'

'Just tell us!'

'Matt, please!'

'Tell us, or I'm gonna have to do this thing. I don't want to do it. But I will.'

Andy looked at Ben. Met his frantic gaze. She saw it in his eyes, the scene playing out. Andy taking the bullet in the brain. Her body rag-dolling on the floor. Ben next. All the vigour going out of him, as if his plug had been yanked from the socket. Matt, Engo and Jake strapping firefighting helmets onto their dead bodies and lighting the place up around them. Driving back to the station car parked at Peanut Leap. They'd make the anonymous call to 911. Then respond to the dispatch officer when the job came over the radio.

Hey, Dispatch, we're up here anyway. Engine 99 crew. We took the station car for a cruise and we have basic equipment on us. We'll head out there while the local guys get their asses into gear.

It would look like an accident. The crew had taken the station car out for a spin, parked to watch the lights on the river and sink beers, and picked up a run-of-the-mill spot-fire call. They'd rolled up to the property, spotted the portable that

had probably served as a construction site office once starting to smoke out. Ben and Andy had taken the spare gear from the back of the car and rushed in ahead of Matt and the rest of the crew, no idea that the blazing building was full of gas bottles and jerry cans that some local cuckoo had been hoarding.

Kaboom.

A tragedy.

Oh, there'd be an inquiry, of course. Wrists would be slapped – about the rec run with the station car, the beers, the half-cocked entry. There would be whispers, too. Especially after what happened to Titus.

But then everybody would cry and forget about it.

Matt and his crew did that: they made people forget.

Andy watched Ben weigh his loyalties. His crew, against the cop he'd brought in to destroy them.

'I don't want to do this, Ben,' Matt said. The huge man's voice was strained. He shifted his grip on the gun. 'Just tell us the truth.'

The wind howled around the shack and the boats clanged on the river and Little Jakey started to cry.