

You loved your last book...but what  
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new  
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# **Born Bad**

Written by Marnie Riches

Published by AVON

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

*Born Bad*

MARNIE RICHES





This novel is entirely a work of fiction.  
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are  
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to  
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is  
entirely coincidental.

Avon  
A division of HarperCollinsPublishers  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF  
[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

A Paperback Original 2017  
1  
Copyright © Marnie Riches 2017

Marnie Riches asserts the moral right to  
be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library  
ISBN 978-0-00-820393-1

Typeset in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TBC

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior  
permission of the publishers.



**MIX**  
Paper from  
responsible sources  
**FSC® C007454**

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote  
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the  
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come  
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and  
ecological needs of present and future generations,  
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at  
[www.harpercollins.co.uk/green](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk/green)

For Caspian

If my name is on the spine, and the story comes from my heart, then you are surely the lungs of this book, since you have breathed life into all of my words. In a world full of bollocks, you're the dog's, Mr Dennis.  
Never forget it.

# Chapter 1

## *Sheila*

The leather case containing the guns was cumbersome and heavy, making her shoulder muscles scream with the effort of pulling it towards her. Looking around to check that she wasn't being watched, she tried to drag it out of the boot of her Porsche Panamera. Dead weight. Looked around again towards the garaging. The doors were closed. No sign of *his* car, thankfully.

'Come on, Sheila,' she counselled herself. 'Grit your teeth, girl.'

With a grunt, she heaved the case out. Dropped it heavily onto the gravel, narrowly missing the peep toes of her purple suede Louboutins. Slammed the boot shut, chipping a nail in the process.

'Bastard thing,' she said, lugging the guns awkwardly across the courtyard and up the steps to the front door. She would definitely have a couple of bruises on her shins by tomorrow. Shit. But at least the determined Mancunian rain wasn't falling on her freshly blow-dried hair.

Inside, her house was silent and pristine. The wooden floors shone. The smell of furniture wax was pungent in

the air. The cleaners had gone for the day and the gardener wasn't due until Friday.

'Anybody home?' she called out. Her voice bounced off the hard surfaces of the glazed banister and naked oak of the staircase. No response, though she hadn't expected one.

Flinging her keys onto the sideboard, Sheila kicked off her heels, carrying the guns to the lower level of the house. She bypassed the spa area and pool to enter the cinema room. It smelled of stale cigar smoke and the dregs at the bottom of Paddy's empty single malt bottle and dirty tumbler. She made a mental note to chastise the cleaners for having missed it. Wrinkled her nose at the manly stink that reminded her too much of the Green Room in her brother-in-law's club.

'Hide it with the other guns and surprise him with it after tea, or leave it out for him to find?' Sheila contemplated aloud, setting the leather case on the coffee table and clicking open the antique silver locks. She appraised the delicate metalwork of the shotguns, studded with semi-precious stones. Both guns were safely ensconced in their own blue velvet bed. Not her cup of tea, but she knew Paddy would appreciate these Ottoman flintlock rifles. Seventeenth century, the dealer had said. They'd go with his collection of swords, pistols and other shit, he had assured her. It was a perfect apology. She'd forked over a pile of her own cash for them, hoping they would be the ultimate oil to pour on troubled waters after Paddy had 'discovered' the email she had sent to Mam and Dad.

All those years she'd fantasised about reforging the bond with her parents that Paddy had insisted she jettison. Decades of being desperate to tell her folks about the girls; about her life; about how much she missed them every single day. Bloody typical that Paddy had gone snooping

through her email account when she'd finally had the balls to contact them on the quiet. She made a mental note to change her email password. Couldn't hide anything from that nosey old bastard. Still, he had her best interests at heart, didn't he?

'Paddy, Paddy O'Brien,' she intoned, looking over at the oil painting of her imperious husband that made him look a good deal less hatchet-faced and more sanguine than he really was. 'You difficult, moody sod.' She snapped the gun case shut. 'I hope to God these cheer you up.'

The sound of a door slamming against a wall and a trill of what she was sure was a woman's laughter made her freeze. Sheila stood tall. Breathing in shallow gasps, she strained to work out where the sound had come from. The spa, perhaps? There was certainly somebody in the house with her. Snatching one of the antique long-barrelled flintlocks, she held the gun out ahead of her and stalked towards the spa. Heart thudding. Forcing herself to be brave. No way of creeping back upstairs to see from the alarm keypad if there had been an intrusion via another zone in the sprawling Bramshott mansion.

To speak, or not to speak. That was the question.

'Who's there?' she said quietly. Unconvincingly.

The thick grey carpet swallowed the sound of her shoeless footfalls. Just ahead loomed the glazed door that separated the cinema room from the spa area and pool. A glimpse of the turquoise glittering pool, its spot-lit ripples dancing white and silver on the vaulted brick ceiling. There was the laughter again.

'Oh, Paddy!' shouted a woman's voice.

Paddy's low voice, rumbling. Saying something indistinct. More laughter.

Sheila edged open the spa door, shaking with adrenalin,

poised for fight or flight. Her sharp eyes darted to the left. To the right. Scanning the tranquil scene. Clean, pale grey tiles. Perfect azure water, still but for the gush of the filtration jets set into the sides of the pool. Teak loungers, arranged at an artful angle. There was nothing to see. And yet, she had not imagined the voices.

Her heartbeat bounced her forwards, almost audible in a lofty space where only the air-conditioning unit buzzed quietly in the background.

‘Come here, you dirty girl. Come to Paddy.’

And there it was. No doubt in her mind. Paddy’s voice, thick with the lustful intent that she recognised immediately. Blatant, inconsiderate bastard. Shitting on his own doorstep. This was a new low.

Though she knew the flintlock was not loaded, she kept the heavy gun hoisted high on her shoulder. Deciding how to tackle this situation. Her options were: walk away and pretend she had not happened upon what was almost certainly a clandestine coupling; shout, ‘Hello!’ announcing her presence, giving them time to make themselves respectable and fashion some bullshit excuse; or creep up on the bastards and give them the fright of their lives.

Padding towards the sound of heavy breathing and the rustle of fabric, Sheila realised the sauna held her husband and his extra-marital mate. The door was standing open. The sound of giggling and Paddy’s lascivious groaning slid out on the steamy, seamy air.

Following the gun’s line of sight, Sheila held her breath. Anger grabbing her natural reticence by the throat and squeezing the apologetic life out of it. She took a noiseless step into the cedar-clad cabana and hefted the gun up to Paddy’s head. His eyes were shut. A beatified smile was plastered across his lying, scheming face. At his feet, a naked



young blonde was crouched, gobbling his cock with some enthusiasm. The soles of her feet were dirty, the heels crusty with dried skin.

‘Surprise!’ Sheila said, savouring the sight of her sexually incontinent husband grabbing at his heart and almost leaping clear of the cabana bench.

With a yelp, the young woman – no more than a girl – jumped to her feet, covering her silicone breasts with splayed fingers. Bitten fingernails. Not a mark on her belly, though. This one had certainly not borne children. But then, Paddy always liked them young.

‘Who are you?’ the girl shouted.

‘I’m his damned wife,’ Sheila said, intoxicated by the heady bloodlust. She swung the barrel of the flintlock towards the girl and dug it into her right breast. ‘That’s who I am. Mrs Bleeding O’Brien. And you’re trespassing in my house and on my husband.’

The girl’s face wrinkled up into an expression that threatened tears or a bout of hysteria. But there was something familiar about her.

‘Sheila. You’re out of fucking line!’ Paddy said. ‘It’s not what you think. You’re frightening her, you bullying bitch. She’s only a kid.’

Only a kid. Only a kid. *That’s* where she knew the girl from. She scrutinised the line of the girl’s eyebrows beneath the heavy, dark eyebrow pencil. Noticed the shape of her lips beneath the now-smudged Ronald McDonald red lipstick.

‘Didn’t you go to school with my Dahlia?’ she asked, pushing the barrel hard into the girl’s breast bone. ‘Stacey Wheelan.’

‘Tracy Wheelan,’ the girl said. A meek, almost infantile voice, as her false lashes flickered shamefully down towards

her vajazzle and back up towards Paddy. Pleading eyes, clearly wishing her sugar daddy would sweeten this bitter confrontation and make Sheila somehow dissolve clean away.

‘Get out,’ Sheila simply said. ‘Go on. Sling your hook, you little slag.’

‘Go on, love,’ Paddy told the girl. His voice was soft, but Sheila could see from the hard set of his mouth that he was seething. And his livid gaze was trained directly on Sheila, scorching its way through her skin.

The storm was coming. Sheila felt suddenly far less brave. Knew instinctively that the unloaded flintlock would be her undoing.

‘I’m sorry,’ Tracy Wheelan said to neither of them in particular. She grabbed her cheap clothes and scuffed her stilettos and shuffled over to the subterranean spa exit. Clattered up the stone steps to ground level. Was gone.

Paddy grabbed the barrel of the gun and wrenched it out of Sheila’s hands.

‘You bitch,’ he said. On his feet now, his nakedness in that enclosed space felt suddenly oppressive. The roundness of his belly pinned her up against the sweaty wall. His erect penis stuck into her navel like an angry thorn. She could smell beer and cigarettes on his breath. He had spent lunch-time in the pub, clearly. Probably some shithole in Parson’s Croft, where he and Conky had swung by to collect protection subs.

‘I was only doing her a favour. Giving her a bit of a shoulder to cry on. Her mam’s just died, for Christ’s sake. She was cut up. I was tense. I’ve been working all the hours God sends and getting no comfort off you. I was giving you space, She.’ Paddy’s eyebrows knitted together. His nostrils flared as he breathed rapidly. In, out, in, out, like

a panther waiting to pounce. ‘There was no harm in it. But you’ve just scarred a young girl for life, you jealous, snooping cow.’

Realising she could not easily make a bolt for freedom now that she was pinned against the wall, Sheila whispered, ‘Sorry, Pad.’ Defensively, she raised her hands to her face.

Paddy rammed the butt of the flintlock into her ribs. The air escaped her lungs in a hiss. The pain was intense.

‘Nasty, bullying bitch.’ Spittle flew from Paddy’s mouth as he brought the flat of the stock down onto her cheekbone.

‘Stop, Paddy!’ Sheila cried, claspng at the side of her face. ‘That’s going to bruise, for Christ’s sake! I bought you the guns to say sorry. I’m sorry, Pad!’ Tears streamed from her eyes, though she struggled hard to hold them inside. Didn’t want to show him how much she was hurting or how frightened and vulnerable she suddenly felt.

He stopped abruptly. Stared down at the gun, as if only noticing it then for the first time. Turned the weapon over in his hands, running stubby fingers over the filigree metalwork.

‘Ottoman?’ he said, raising an eyebrow. He raised the flintlock to his shoulder and stared down the barrel at Sheila. Pulled the trigger. ‘Bang.’

Sheila winced.

Paddy winked.

‘Nice gun,’ he said. Then, he hit her over the head hard with the barrel.

## Chapter 2

### *Conky*

‘I’ll be down in a tick,’ Paddy shouted to Conky McFadden, poking his head out from one of the doors on the galleried landing. Fastening the cuffs of his shirt. On his bottom half, he wore only his pants. Hairy, freckled red legs on show. ‘I’m just going for a shit.’

‘You take your time, boss . . .’ Conky said, peering down at the shine on his new shoes. ‘. . . While I hang around like a fart in a trance,’ he added, lowering his voice to a half-whisper. ‘Sure, I’ve got nothing better to do at eleven pm on a Friday night.’

Conky stood at the bottom of the stairs, hands folded behind him, sighing. Remembering how Paddy had stunk their cell out when they’d done time together, all those years ago. He had always laughed that it was the evil coming out. Bloody hell. Nothing changed, did it?

Glancing into the oversized mirror by the cloakroom, he double-checked that his trusty hair-piece was still reliably fixed into place, with his own dwindling hair successfully combed over the artful construction. He poked at it gently. It was robust, with no visible bald bits. Excellent. He must pay that bean-counting eejit, David Goodman, a little

intelligence-sourcing visit soon, while his hair was looking quite so regal as to be almost intimidating. Maureen Kaplan's son-in-law always blabbed a little louder with proper use of The Eyes, the power of The Hair and, of course, a pistol in his flapping mouth.

Conky tried to lessen his frustration by focusing on his thoughts about *A Brief History of Seven Killings* – the Man Booker Prize winner he was meant to finish in time for his book club. Which he had missed tonight because of Paddy. He checked his watch. There was a Dutchman waiting at the club to discuss the supply of mephedrone in the north-west. A big meeting, called at short notice at Paddy's behest. But Paddy loved to keep people waiting. Conky, however, liked to be on time. Trapped in the punctuality paradox of being Paddy O'Brien's muscle, Conky scratched at the nervous rash that started to itch up his neck beneath his best shirt.

'Alright, Conks?' Sheila said, emerging from the kitchen.

He turned around to greet the boss' wife with a warm smile. Pushed his Ray-Bans up his nose to kiss her on the cheek. She smelled of exotic home cooking and perfume. He drank her aroma in and tried to commit it to memory. Her small, soft hand felt like a child's inside his. He prayed his palms were dry. And that she wouldn't see his irritable rash morphing into a blush.

'Sheila,' he said. Not knowing what to say next.

'Want something to eat? I made a lovely paella. I'm just putting aside the leftovers. There's plenty.' She started to untie the apron from her tiny waist.

'Aye. I could eat the arse of a baby through the cot bars, so I could,' he said. Normally, she trilled with laughter when he used those old Norn Iron turns of phrase from his Belfast boyhood. Tonight, there was not even the glimmer of a

smile. 'I was only going to grab a burger at the club. Paddy's due there in ten. So, I might have to eat it on the hoof, if you don't mind, Sheila. The boss—'

'Paddy can wait,' Sheila said in a low voice. The lines either side of her mouth seemed etched deeper than usual.

She turned away from him. He followed her diminutive gym-honed form over to the range cooker, never taking his eyes from her. Savouring the opportunity to look without being seen or judged. But there was something unusual about her gait. She was walking gingerly.

'Are you okay, She?' he asked.

Turning to face him, Sheila's gaze only reached as far as his chin. 'Fine. I overdid it at the gym.'

He took several strides towards her and raised his glasses to his forehead, putting aside any self-conscious discomfort in knowing she would be able to see his protruding eyes. Stooping, he scrutinised the delicate bone structure of her face in the bright sparkling light of the chandeliers. Could see the ghost of a livid green bruise on her forehead, lurking just beneath a layer of heavy makeup.

'What happened?' He stroked her cheek gently.

She didn't retreat from his touch but nevertheless refused to meet his gaze. She was blinking rapidly. 'I tripped over my step in aerobics. Landed on one of my five-k barbell weights, face first, didn't I?'

She looked furtively over at the kitchen door, as though she expected Paddy to be standing there, eavesdropping. Started to dish paella clumsily onto a plate, treating Conky to more uncomfortable silence, as though she resented him for drawing attention to the obvious.

'If there's anything you need to talk about, Sheila,' he said, feeling the pressure of so many unspoken words, accumulated over years, pushing behind his thyroid eyes.

Her body stiffened suddenly. She turned back to the cooker. Busy with her frying pan.

Conky realised Paddy had appeared, and was now standing behind them.

‘Leave the grub, mate,’ the boss said, eyeing him carefully. ‘She’ll probably poison you with all that foreign shit anyway, won’t you, She? I nearly dropped my guts down that carsey.’ Paddy strode over and slapped his wife’s behind. Treated her to an aggressive kiss on the neck that she pulled away from.

Glad to leave the awkward atmosphere behind, Conky bid Sheila farewell and drove the boss beneath the fool’s gold of the streetlights down the A56, away from the leafy Cheshire suburbs, through Stretford and towards Manchester’s trading-estate wastelands. They ringed the centre like a shit city wall – identikit, corrugated iron super-sheds, punctuated only by the terraces of Old Trafford, the space-station-like construction of the Emirates cricket stadium and the gaudy blue dome of the Trafford Centre in the distance. All of that invisible as night fell in earnest, leaving only anonymous, hulking grey boxes behind high iron fencing that rusted in the Mancunian drizzle.

M1 House looked like any other premises, but for lasers that seeped skywards from the Perspex lights in the roof and the thump-thump of dance music that emanated from within.

‘Alright, our Pad,’ Frank said, greeting his older brother at the door deferentially. He thrust a full whisky tumbler towards him. ‘Come on. Come on, man. That Dutch bloke’s been waiting hours and he’s boring as fuck.’

Conky eyed the gaunt, twitchy figure of Frank O’Brien, wincing as Paddy grabbed the drink from him with one hand and administered a brotherly blow to his kidney with

the other. Frank was already waxy-faced from whatever cocktail of drugs the daft wee fecker had managed to lay his hands on that evening, dressed like a 1990s throwback in a baggy long-sleeved top and cargo jeans. Shuffling through his giant temple to dance music in grotty old sneakers. A reluctant Pontius Pilate, Conky mused, serving beneath Paddy who was always channelling Tiberius on a good day; Caligula on a bad.

The bass-heavy music enveloped him, pulsating through the hot, damp air – it was almost tangible. Deafening shite. It was certainly no Dvořák or Mozart – it made Conky's teeth sensitive and aggravated the pains in his legs whenever his thyroid was out of whack. Strobe lights flick-flickering all around, dimmed only slightly by the tinted prescription prisms in his Ray-Ban lenses that mitigated some of the thyroid eye disease that plagued him. Lasers flashing green and red in precise fans, pointing upwards, moving downwards to slice through the fog of the dry ice. Everybody caught in nanosecond freeze-frames. Hands in the air. Shaking that thang. Fecking eejits. Staccato dancing like possessed puppetry where the DJ was the puppet master.

'Make some noise, M1 House!' the DJ shouted as he blended the groove of one track into another, perfectly maintaining 128 beats per minute.

Jack O'Brien. Son of Frank O'Brien and number one nephew to Paddy. An accidental Adonis thanks to his dead mother's Balearic colouring. The crowd worshipped this man, turning towards him in unison. Screaming and cheering up to the distant warehouse ceiling – above the lighting rigs, through the corrugated Perspex to the night sky beyond; out into the universe where their love would mingle with the stars.

Frank cheered. Pointed towards him.



‘Spin those records, son!’

The heaving sea of firm, slender young bodies parted to let them through. As they did so, Conky spotted the enemy: a mixed-race lad with a lightning flash shaved into the dark stubble of his scalp. Bell something, if memory served. A biblical name. Deuteronomy or something of that ilk. Paddy elbowed Conky in the ribs and nodded, giving the order. Dutifully, he grabbed Frank by his baggy top and yanked him at speed through the cavorting crowd to the backstage area.

At his side, Paddy had thunder behind his eyes.

‘Twat!’ He cuffed Frank on the side of his head.

Frank was ashen-faced. ‘What’s up, Pad? How comes Roy Orbison here has got a grip of me? I babysat your supplier, didn’t I? I wanna go and vibe with me adoring public, now. Know what I mean?’ Frank toyed with the sleeves of his top.

‘Who’ve you got dealing tonight?’ his older brother asked, gesticulating towards the dancefloor, visible beyond Jack in his booth.

Frank shrugged, still twitching as though he had withdrawals from the dancefloor. ‘Business as usual, man. You know? The Parson’s Croft kids. Degsy and his girls. Nicky, Maggie. They’re flogging Hong Kong Colin’s latest batch of E and meth, like you told them. Dealing some super-fine super skunk. Few baggies of coke. Making the happiness and contentment go round, man.’ He drew a heart in the air, ending with both hands making the peace sign.

But Paddy looked anything but peaceful and content. He smashed his whisky tumbler on the floor. Grabbed his younger brother by the back of the neck like a mother cat taking its wayward kitten in its maw. Pushed his face towards the crowd. ‘It’s crawling with Boddingtons, you dozy

wanker.' Slapped him on the back of his sweaty head with a freckled, hairy hand.

Narrowing his eyes, Conky refocused on the sea of faces. The boy with the lightning flash was palming tabs in a baggie onto some girl and pocketing cash. That much, he could see. Very shoddy procedure.

Frank opened and closed his mouth. Rolling his head, as though panning for an explanation in his empty druggy head like a prospector hoping to find an elusive gold nugget in the mud.

'I don't know how he got past the fellers on the door, Pad. Honest. Maybe someone let him in the back. Maybe he just slipped through with a group of people. There's two thousand kids in here. I can't keep tabs on them. Know what I mean?'

Turning to Conky, Paddy's thin lips arced downwards into a scowl.

'Find Degsy. And get that little Boddlington shit back here. I'm not having stray dogs pissing on my territory.' Hunched shoulders beneath the suit said he was bristling with anger.

'Well, strictly speaking, Pad, it's *my* territory,' Frank said, wide-eyed. 'As long as people are having a good time, I'm not bothered, me.'

'Fucking dickhead.'

The slap that Paddy gave him across his face clearly had some weight behind it. Frank rubbed his cheek, suddenly looking like a small boy. Conky knew better than to inter-vene.

'Get that Boddlington arsehole and Degsy back here,' Paddy said.

Amidst a flurry of disingenuous apologies, Conky returned with Degsy and the Boddlington interloper,

kicking them at the heels to make them move forwards with his gun trained on their backs. Taking pride in the fear he instilled in Degsy, at least. He was the O'Brien firm's Loss Adjuster. He had a reputation to uphold. All who came before him in the Conky McFadden court of justice quaked in their boots.

'This is Leviticus Bell,' he announced, pushing the Boddlington low-level dealer to his knees. Not Deuteronomy, but still a biblical-standard cheeky arsehole. 'And our very own lovely Derek.' He poked Degsy in the back with the barrel of his gun.

Paddy cracked his knuckles. Took something shining from his breast pocket and slid it onto his hand. A knuckle duster. Degsy, a tall bundle of oversized G-Star Raw and Diesel with spots around his mouth that said he smoked just as much meth as he sold, paled instantly.

'On your knees, you lanky twat!' Paddy said, breathing heavily through his nostrils.

Degsy's Adam's apple bounced up and down in his scrawny neck.

'Sorry, Mr O'Brien. I don't know why I'm here, like, but whatever it is, I'm sorry. I told Mr McFadden.'

The left hook that Paddy delivered to Degsy's temple sent the dealer's head spinning to the right with a crack. Blood spatters clinging in a jaunty red to the black nightclub walls.

'Christ, Pad. There's no need for that,' Frank said, wincing.

'Shut your trap, Frank. I don't give a stuff if Queen Elizabeth's name's on the liquor licence above the door. I'm the boss here. Me.' He dug into his chest with a stubby thumb.

Paddy dragged Degsy to his feet. Though he towered

above even Conky, Degsy seemed small next to the King. 'You want to work for me and stay alive, Derek, you keep Boddlington scum out of my venues, right?'

Degsy nodded contritely. Seemed a little dazed. Touched the blood on the side of his head that now seeped onto his clothing.

'Yes, Mr O'Brien. Sorry. It won't happen again.'

Struggling against Conky's grip, the young mixed-race Boddlington interloper spat at Degsy.

'Parson's Croft piece of shit!' he shouted at him. Turned to Paddy and Frank. 'I'm not bleeding scared of yous, man.'

Conky cuffed his ear with his pistol. 'You'd better be, you wee shite. I'm gonna enjoy putting a bullet in you.' His practised words came out automatically as he dwelled all the while on his missed book club and the strangeness of Sheila's behaviour. Decades of doing the same job could do that to a man.

The boy turned to Conky, frowning. 'Oh yeah? You want the Fish Man to come and fillet you, old man?' 'Cause that's who you're dealing with if you lay a frigging finger on me.'

'What's your name again, son?' Paddy stepped closer and grabbed him by his chin. Pushed his face upwards, examining his delicate bone structure to see if nobility was hidden in his genes.

The boy spat a second time on the floor at Paddy's side. 'Leviticus Bell.'

'Plucky little bastard, aren't you?'

The boy somehow wriggled free of Conky's grip. Lunged at Paddy. A flash of something metallic, under the dim backstage lights. Red, spreading quickly through the suit-fabric covering Paddy's forearm. The boy, running away; sprinting like a hunted gazelle through the emergency exit.

'Boss!' Conky shouted. He pushed his glasses onto his

forehead to get a better look at the wound. His breath coming ragged with an accelerated heartbeat as he stared down at the gash.

‘It’s just a scratch!’ Paddy said, pressing his fingers into the wound.

But then, something more sinister, as Paddy’s look of surprise and anger turned into a wide-eyed hundred-yard stare. Clutching at his chest, he began sinking to his knees.

‘Jesus. I feel—’ he said. Grimacing, then, his eyes clamped shut.

‘Call an ambulance!’ Conky barked at Frank.

As Frank punched 999 into his phone, he seemed to be watching with part-glee, part-dread as his brother slumped to the floor, unconscious.