

Day Six

The bloody rain. For twenty-four hours it had fallen, flaying the banks of the river with a tropical fervor. Except it was cold. Granted the summer was officially over, but just two days ago the volunteers had been wearing shorts, while Fleet had stood sweating in his thinnest suit. Since the weather had broken, the water had struck like winter hail. Hard, pitiless, icy. A month's rainfall in barely a day, so they said. Fleet didn't know about climate change, all that, but he knew when something wasn't right. And this weather? It was freakish. As messed-up as everything else that was going on in this town right now.

He paused in the doorway of his hotel to light a cigarette, taking almost as much pleasure from the brief burst of warmth as he did from the nicotine itself. He exhaled a cloud of smoke that was immediately doused by the tumbling rain, then took two more drags and tossed the cigarette into the gutter, knowing it would be ruined anyway the moment he stepped into the torrent.

That's fifty pence down the drain right there, said a voice inside his head. His wife Holly's, unmistakably, and Fleet felt a pang from somewhere in his gut. It was like an ulcer, this constant twinge, and he hadn't yet found a way to stop it hurting.

He thought of home. Was it raining like this there?, he wondered. Because it felt biblical. If he were to get into his car and drive the three miles to the parish limits, would he find himself confronting a ring of blue sky, a rainbow bridge to the world outside?

You heavens above, rain down my righteousness . . .

What was that? Genesis? Isaiah? The quote came unbidden, as powerfully evocative as a familiar smell, and it made him want to light another cigarette.

“Detective Inspector Fleet?”

Just as he'd been about to dash toward his company Insignia, Fleet turned. It was the hotelier, a woman in her late forties to whom Fleet had taken an instant dislike on first meeting her, only to later reverse his opinion completely. She dressed primly, rarely smiled, and wore her hair in a skin-stretching bun. Fleet had marked her down as yet another disapproving gossip, in a town with far more than its fair share, but she'd

proved discreet, generous and obliquely loyal. In many ways, she was the closest thing Fleet had in this town to a friend.

“There’s a call for you,” said Anne, as she pointed over her left shoulder. Her expression was apologetic. She was familiar enough now with Fleet’s business to know the news he received was never good.

Fleet checked the screen of his mobile. There were no missed calls, but there was also no reception. The entire town was pocked with dead spots. Which seemed as appropriate an analogy as any.

He followed Anne back inside. The hotel wasn’t luxurious, but it was a luxury. Fleet lived only an hour or so along the coast, but rather than traveling back and forth he’d taken a room here, at the Harbor View Hotel. For convenience, he’d told himself. The Harbor View was no more or less than your typical seaside-town B&B, and Fleet might have picked any one of the dozen or so guesthouses that were clustered beside the harbor. All would have had space, and Anne was the only thing that set this one apart. She cleaned his room, fried his breakfast and—now—fielded his calls. She did so much it made Fleet feel guilty, to the extent he’d started making his own bed. Not that he used it much anyway. Most nights, since checking in just under a week ago, he’d sat up gazing at the harbor, imagining what might be hidden beneath the water.

Anne showed him to the little office behind the reception counter, and gestured to the receiver lying unhooked on the desk. She nodded when Fleet offered his thanks, and then closed the glass door to give him some privacy.

“Robin Fleet,” he announced into the receiver.

“Boss? It’s Nicky.”

The line was poor, the reception wherever Nicky was clearly only a fraction better than it was in the black spot that covered the area around the harbor.

“What’s up, Nicky? I was just on my way to the river.”

Detective Sergeant Nicola Collins took a breath. Even through the crackle she sounded excited about something.

“We’ve found them,” she said.

Fleet straightened. “You did? When?”

“Just now. And, Rob? Brace yourself. It’s a fucking shitshow.”

*Excerpted from **The Search Party** by Simon Lelic, published by Berkley, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC. Copyright © 2020*