Slammer

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Extract

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Nick Glass lifted his elbows off the desk and leaned backwards a few inches. The prison shrink's breath was sweet, like hot milk. Not unpleasant, exactly. But it made Glass feel ill. He'd have asked if he could open a window, but the pokey little offi ce didn't have one.

John Riddell visited once a week, usually on Mondays, and the smell was stronger each time. 'How are you settling in?' he asked.

Glass said, 'Okay,' thankful that, when he breathed in now, all he could smell was furniture polish.

Riddell opened the file in front of him. 'Hmmm,' he said, nodding. He slid his specs down his nose and peered at Glass. It was a look he'd clearly practised. 'You sure about that?'

Glass gave Riddell a look back. Glass could do looks. He'd learned over the past few weeks. That wasn't all he'd learned.

Riddell said, 'Everything you say in this room is confidential.'

'Right,' Glass said. As if that mattered.

'You understand that, Nick?'

'I'm not a child.'

Riddell leaned forward. 'I didn't mean to be patronising. I'm sorry.'

The smell again. Glass saw a lime-green plastic tumbler, milk spilling out as it fell to the floor. Then the image vanished and Glass only saw what was in front of him. 'Right.'

'It's just . . .' Riddell took his specs off.

'Just what?'

'This is a chance for you to get it off your chest.'

'Get what off my chest?'

Riddell put his specs back on. 'Whatever's on it.'

'My chest's fine.' But Glass could tell Riddell didn't believe him. He wondered who'd been speaking out of turn. Shouldn't matter, he knew, but the idea that he was being spoken about made him feel as if someone had poured cement down his throat and it was hardening in his stomach. People could be telling Riddell anything at all and he'd believe it too. He looked the sort.

Riddell fiddled with his pen, eyes straight ahead.

Glass tried to guess what they might have been saying about him. He should ask. No, he didn't want to go there. You never knew where it might lead.

Maybe they'd been talking about him and Mafi a. Saying they were too close. Making homosexual references. Puerile shite like that.

Glass wished they'd grow up. He was only twenty-two but he was a damn sight more mature than the rest of them. He'd lived. Seen things, done things, felt real pain, the sort that crushed your bones and scooped all the flesh out of your body.

Riddell said, 'How are the officers treating you? You okay with the nickname?'

He might as well have picked Glass up and slammed him headfirst against the wall. What the hell was wrong with Riddell that he had to be such a provocative bastard? Maybe his wife had left him. Packed a suitcase, stormed off to her mother's. It had to be something like that.

'Can I go now?' he asked.

Riddell looked at his watch. 'This is supposed to be a thirty-minute session.'

Glass glanced at the clock on the wall behind Riddell's head. Twenty minutes to go. No way could he endure that.

'So how about we just pretend?' Glass said. 'Nobody needs to know we cut it short.'

Riddell sat back in his chair and smiled. 'This session could benefit you. It's not about making you uncomfortable. It's about helping you adapt.'

Glass said nothing. He was fi ne. Didn't need any help. He could adapt by himself, thank you very much.

'Your wife,' Riddell said. 'And daughter.'

Glass dug his nails into his palms. Yeah, so it could be difficult for families, he knew that. But there was no need to bring Lorna and Caitlin into it. He didn't want to talk about them here. They were part of a different world and none of Riddell's business.

He'd be curt, maybe Riddell would get the hint. 'Caitlin's settled into school,' he said. 'Lorna's fine. None of us miss Dunfermline.' Glad to be rid of it. Well, glad to be rid of Lorna's mother.

'Must be tough for Caitlin, though. Difficult age. Remind me. Five, six?' Riddell waited, then filled the silence himself. 'You became a father very young.'

Glass sat it out, stared at the empty photo frame turned sideways on the desk. Tin. Pewter, maybe. Glass wasn't sure of the difference. He felt sorry for Riddell, not having a photo to put in it. Maybe his wife hadn't left him after all. Maybe he didn't have a wife. Maybe he had no one. Glass was angry at himself for feeling sorry for the poor sod.

'Okay,' Riddell said. 'Sign this.' He turned a sheet towards Glass, handed over his pen.

A list of names. Dates. Times.

Glass was surprised by how many he recognised. He scrawled his name. Then he levered himself to his feet, turned to go.

'Thanks, Nick,' Riddell said. 'Any time you feel like talking, let me know. It'll do you good.'

Prison Officer Nick Glass didn't think so. But he nodded, for show.