

END GAME

Charlie Gallagher

Part Four of the Langthorne Series

I don't want to die

Not like this.

Not like this.

Chapter 1

His wife straightened herself and backed away, beaming at him through the screen. He could only see parts of the kitchen in the background — the island work surface with its oversized tap arcing from the centre, and the large window beyond. She leaned against the island and looked directly at him. The kitchen was newly finished, the heart of the home and her pride and joy.

'Is that better?'

'Much better. I can see you now!'

For a second and then she was just a silhouette. Sunlight poured through the window behind her and filled the room.

'Shut up! I'm a mess. I've not even put my face on.'

He made a show of checking his watch and opening his mouth in mock horror.

'It's nearly nine, Shelley!'

'It's half eight.'

'Close enough.'

'At least I've done my hair.' Shelley raised a hand to the tightly wrapped headscarf. Her hair loss had been sudden, almost immediately after the first treatment.

'I like it. It's a new one, right?'

Shelley nodded. 'Yup. Matches nicely with the top.' Shelley wore a white T-shirt with a large *YSL* emblem on the front. She'd spotted it on her way out of the treatment centre and he'd bought it for her as a treat.

Some days were better than others. Today she was smiling, almost upbeat. Whenever he could get into the privacy of his office, he used the video streaming feature on his phone so he could see and talk to her. He told her he just liked to see his beautiful wife, but they both knew he was checking up on her, making sure that she really was okay. Because when she wasn't, there was no hiding it.

She had slept for a few hours. It was amazing what difference it made. He had needed to tiptoe out of the room this morning. Normally, when his alarm woke him, she would already be downstairs, waiting for him with a weak smile and a strong coffee.

The aura surrounding his wife darkened. A figure passed close to the window and he rolled his eyes in irritation.

'And you can tell your mum to leave our garden alone! I told her I'll get out there myself, but it will have to wait till spring.'

Now he could make out her scowl.

'I told her.'

'I can see she's out there. You should tell her to stay away from the window.'

His wife twisted round to look out. 'Don't worry. She's not coming till one.'

'I saw her in the garden!'

He shook his head, smiling. He had caught them out. Her mother would be fussing over Shelley and pottering in the garden all day. It would finish up cluttered with hanging signs and cutesy ornaments, just like hers.

His wife went over to the window. 'Oh yeah, there is someone.'

He had to strain now to hear her through the tiny speakers. She turned towards the back door. A lot of their friends used this entrance rather than come to the front. The door was out of sight but he could see his wife. She stopped and reached out to open it. Then she stepped back.

'Can I help you?' He could hear she sounded nervous even through the tiny speakers. The man watching from twenty miles away tensed and called out.

'Shelley! Honey, lock the door and talk to them through the window. Shelley?'

She didn't turn, didn't acknowledge him. She had frozen. Was it the camera? Then she moved — there was nothing wrong with the picture. Shelley was backing away from whoever was at the door. She held her arms out as if to placate them. She looked scared.

'What . . . what do you want?'

He jumped to his feet and stood watching his phone. It lay on its side. On the screen, his wife walked backwards across their kitchen. He fought the urge to shout out. It would achieve nothing and he didn't want to risk being cut off.

A hand in a black leather glove came into view on the far left side of his screen. It held a small axe. Hand and axe moved forward. His wife had come to a halt, backed up against their new cooker, only just in his view. The figure now appeared at the opposite end of the screen, moving forward slowly and deliberately. The man was dressed in black, with a balaclava that revealed a slither of white skin in the eye holes. The man walked in front of the window, and the screen went dark, like an eclipse, then the camera slowly refocussed.

His wife's hands dropped to her side. He saw her eyes dart around the kitchen. There was a knife block to her right, dead centre of his screen. The intruder was probably closer but if she was fast she could get to it first. But that axe. No, she didn't stand a chance.

The axe was held high. It glinted in the sunlight.

He could see Shelley trying to sidle towards the camera and away from the threat. She came up against the fridge, and stopped. She closed her eyes. The blade now rested on her nose. Even with the restricted view of a small screen, he could see clearly what was happening — and what was about to happen. She was totally helpless.

The man's voice came through the speakers. *'Sit on the floor!'*

He heard Shelley's terrified whimper. She stayed on her feet.

'Sit on the fucking floor, bitch!'

Her legs seemed to fold up beneath her.

'Move and I will put this through your fucking skull. Do you understand me?'

Twenty miles away, frozen to the spot, her husband could no longer see her. The intruder stood in his kitchen, pointing the axe downwards. Then he turned and looked straight at the phone.

'Barry Lance. I know who you are. I know that every day you call your wife at this time. I know you are in your office at Langthorne House right now and I will know if you mention anything that has happened at your home to your colleagues. Do you understand?'

Barry replayed the message in his mind. The voice wasn't familiar.

He bent towards the phone. 'You leave my wife alone.' It was all he could manage.

The man suddenly filled the screen. Then all Barry could see was black material. He had picked up the phone.

'If you inform your colleagues I will kill your wife with an axe in her skull. If you do not follow my instructions to the letter I will kill your wife with an axe in her skull. Do not do anything stupid, Barry Lance. I am not blessed with patience or mercy.'

Barry seized his phone. He had to hold it in both shaking hands. His jaw was clamped shut.

'I choose an axe. Not because it makes it easy, it doesn't. I choose an axe because it makes it fun. Do you understand? Or do I need to provide you with a live demonstration?'

'No! God no! What instructions? What do you want?' Barry held his breath.

'*You can start by answering the phone.*'

The picture disappeared, and the screen displayed *connection lost*. Barry stared at it. *What did he mean, answer the phone? Who was he? What just happened?*

He looked helplessly around his office, and then heard a shrill ring. He followed the sound upwards, to a black mobile phone taped roughly to the ceiling, vibrating with an incoming call. It was directly above the desk and Barry kicked over a lamp in his hurry to clamber up. He had to steady his hands as he picked at the tape.

'Yes?' Barry remained standing on his office desk.

'Good. You will need to follow my instructions if you want your wife to live.' The voice was clearer now.

'What instructions?'

'All in good time. Right now you have a meeting to go to. Put this phone in your pocket. I'll be speaking to you later in the day.'

The call ended and Barry stood looking at the phone. He ought to know how these things worked, he was a trained negotiator for God's sake. It was just that right now he couldn't remember what he had learnt, he wasn't thinking straight. He knew the man was giving himself time to move Shelley. He also knew that if the bastard was any good, it would be impossible to find her once he had done so.

And Barry was twenty miles away.

This man knew who he was, knew where he lived and who his wife was. And he'd managed to tape a fucking phone to the ceiling of his office. Barry had never been more on the back foot.

'Sir?'

Barry started. He hadn't heard the door open.

'Yeah?'

'Are you okay, sir?'

'Yeah, of course. Why?'

'Well, it's just that you're standing on your desk, sir. Is there a problem?' Barry was suddenly aware of what he must look like. His head almost touched the ceiling, tape hung down where he had just pulled the phone away. He had felt flecks fall onto his brow, they transferred to his hand as he wiped a layer of sweat away, it was white paint.

'I'm fine.'

'Are you going to the morning meeting, sir? I've been asked to come and get you. I think they've made a start already.'

'Oh.' Barry looked at the clock on his wall. He was never late for anything. 'Er, no, actually. Send my apologies.'

Barry climbed down from the table. He knocked a pen pot and a tray onto the floor as he did so but he did nothing to clear up the mess. His colleague stooped to pick up the papers Barry had scattered on his way out. The meeting room was to the right of his office. The way out of the building was in the opposite direction. Barry wheeled to the left and broke into a run.