

SIMON
LENDRUM

THE
SLOW
ROLL

'ONE HELL OF A
DEBUT - LENDRUM
IS A WRITER TO
KEEP AN EYE ON'

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To Claire, Jack and Chloe.
Thank you for not giggling when I said
I was going upstairs to write a book.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Lendrum grew up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the North of England, gradually moving south after leaving school. He went to Cambridge first, then progressed to London. In 2004, he took a bigger leap and moved to Auckland, the place he now calls home. Simon has had a successful career in advertising and is currently CEO of the Commercial Communications Council.

CHAPTER ONE

The man sitting across the table has O'Malley's attention.

It's not the man's size that has O'Malley rapt, though he is impressive in all dimensions, his stomach pushing for space against the constraints of the booth's table, and his width dominating a seat intended for two. Nor is it his voice, which is deep yet soft, encouraging O'Malley to lean in to hear his words. It is Mr Tupuola's eyes. As he speaks, his large brown irises are the hooks, pulling O'Malley in. They are full of deference and humility, focusing downwards towards the table's surface, avoiding direct eye contact. This is a man accustomed to social hierarchies, to calling lesser men 'boss', and to the iniquities of the world he struggles through. O'Malley's a sucker for the type, and he knows he'll end up helping him, but he still puts up a fight. It will serve as evidence for the defence at a later date, when O'Malley is telling himself 'I told you so'.

'You can't hire me. I don't know what you've been told, but I'm not a private detective.' Firm, yet factual.

'But you've helped others — Grant gave me your name, said you're the man,' counters Mr Tupuola, applying a dose of flattery.

'That's different: I helped Grant out as a friend. A favour, that's all.' And seeing Mr Tupuola drawing breath to argue this point, continues: 'You need a professional. Someone who does it every day. I'm not that.'

O'Malley's reluctance to get involved isn't lost on Mr Tupuola. But those eyes aren't done yet. They moisten, a hint of despair creeping through.

‘Please, Mr O’Malley. My daughter has disappeared, and the police aren’t interested. I asked around, and my friends say I need to speak to you. I will find the money, if that’s what you’re worried about. I just want my Sefina back.’

‘Two things. First, it’s just O’Malley — no “mister”. Everyone just calls me O’Malley. Second, it’s not about money. As I said, I am not a professional. I have helped a few people out over the years, but this,’ he says, spreading his arms wide to take in their surroundings, ‘this is what I do.’

The booth the men are occupying sits in an over-priced burger joint, which itself sits within the bowels of the city’s only casino. Every walkway is populated with slot machines, but the domain O’Malley is indicating is the poker room. It is where you can find O’Malley most evenings, and where Grant sent Mr Tupuola to ask for him tonight.

‘I am sorry for interrupting your card game, Mr — Sorry, O’Malley,’ Mr Tupuola says, correcting himself in line with O’Malley’s preference for informality. But maybe it also reveals a diminishing respect for this man who cares more for gambling than for a missing girl. ‘I have got the wrong end of the stick. I won’t keep you any longer.’

Sometimes the best poker players are the ones who’ve never held a playing card. As Mr Tupuola makes to move from the booth, his despondency clear, O’Malley finds himself raising a hand in protest.

‘Wait,’ he says, halting the big man’s exit. ‘I can’t promise anything, but I can ask around, and see what I can find out. You’ll need to tell me more about your daughter first, though.’

Mr Tupuola shifts his weight back to face O’Malley, a small movement that only emphasises how little he’d actually moved before O’Malley folded to his bluff. Some poker player I am, O’Malley thinks.

As O’Malley reflects on his poor negotiation skills, a waitress approaches the table, offering them both a drink. O’Malley orders a beer, whatever’s on tap. His new client opts for water. It doesn’t take O’Malley long to get the skinny on Sefina. It’s a familiar tale.

The Tupuolas were once a happy family of Samoan descent, surviving in the south of the city, attending church on Sunday morning. Loto and Natia worked four jobs between them to provide a steady life for their children, of which there were three, with Sefina the baby of the family. Life was as good as it could be, with enough money coming in to get by, and no signs of the darker influences that sometimes come when geography puts you side-by-side with those you wouldn't choose as your neighbours.

But the world had other ideas for the Tupuolas, as it seems to do too often to God-fearing people with good hearts. Sefina's older sister was killed in a car crash, when she put her faith in the unlicensed teenage boy behind the wheel. The driver survived, but Talia didn't even make it to the hospital. Things spiralled from there.

'When we lost our daughter, Natia was so strong, and I was weak.' Loto Tupuola tells it slowly, uncomfortable opening up to a stranger about matters that he has perhaps never spoken of with such clarity.

'I drank, and I lost one of my jobs when I failed the alcohol test on-site, and then I drank some more. I was angry, and sad, and ... I left Natia to carry the load, and look after the kids, and I think holding all of that inside her, it's what made her sick ...' His words trail off. It's O'Malley's turn to stare at the table, trying to dilute the shame and grief that Loto is sharing. There's no let-up, though, and O'Malley guesses what's coming even before Loto says it.

'Natia died eighteen months after the crash,' the grief-stricken man continues. 'She ignored the signs until she couldn't, and by then it was too late.'

O'Malley's beer is looking pretty good at this point, but when he takes a drink it tastes sour, as if the grief that has enveloped their table has already settled at the bottom of his glass. He pushes the glass to one side and tries to comfort the broken man in front of him.

'I'm sorry for your losses, Loto,' he says. It is all he can think of to say.

'Thank you, Mr O'Malley, but you understand now why I need you to find Sefina.' A statement rather than a question.

'What about your son?' O'Malley asks. Loto's face darkens, and O'Malley thinks he sees a flash of anger in those eyes that have done so much of the

talking this evening.

‘Paremoremo,’ he states simply. A destination O’Malley is all too familiar with.

‘How long?’ O’Malley asks without judgment.

‘He’s been there eight months. Maybe another three years, if he keeps out of trouble,’ Loto says. Great. Another thing for Loto to blame himself for. O’Malley doesn’t probe. He can follow it up later if it becomes relevant, but pressing Mr Tupuola for details about his son’s incarceration for now feels like unnecessary punishment. There are times when even the largest of men are no match for the weight on their shoulders.

‘So now it’s you and Sefina. And what — she’s just taken off, no warning?’

‘Nothing. It isn’t like her. She’s gone. Her bag’s gone, and a few clothes, I think. But I need her back, O’Malley. She’s all I’ve got.’

O’Malley thinks it’s strange, and maybe there’s something Loto is leaving out. An argument, perhaps, or words spoken that can’t be taken back. But he pushes Loto and gets nothing more. The big Samoan seems sincere, and O’Malley’s been looking for a project anyway. Chasing a teenage girl around town isn’t quite what he had in mind, but you play the cards you’re dealt. He pushes Loto for more details, somewhere to start.

‘You’ve asked her friends, their parents?’ Most kids who run don’t go far. Mostly, they leave a trail of breadcrumbs so their parents can find them. But Loto has searched and drawn a blank. Doesn’t say it, but he’s here with O’Malley as a last resort.

Loto gives O’Malley some names. Friends of Sefina, places she likes to hang out, but nothing that gives O’Malley a strong starting point. He isn’t confident that Sefina’s friends will be any more forthcoming to a stranger than to a worried father. Still, he’s worked with less, and he takes the recent photograph of Sefina that Loto has brought with him, shaking his hand in confirmation that he will do what he can.

‘I’ll see what I can do, Loto. I can’t promise I’ll find her, but I’ll do my best. If that’s not good enough, I’ll put you in touch with a cop who *will* listen.’

‘I hope it doesn’t come to that, O’Malley,’ Loto replies, all business now he’s got O’Malley on board. ‘From what I’ve been told, you’ll get the job done. Please find my daughter, O’Malley.’

Apparently, they’ve talked enough. Loto Tupuola thanks O’Malley for his time, and squeezes himself out of the booth, shuffling down the corridor, leaving his problem firmly in O’Malley’s lap.

O’Malley’s never been one to rush into a problem. He needs time to think about the challenge of finding Sefina, and he figures he may as well play some cards as he does. He returns to the poker room, taking a seat in a small-stakes cash game. He isn’t looking for big action, but wants to feel the comfort of chips riffling in his hand as he contemplates where to start on his latest fool’s errand.

The table is full, and the faces are familiar. O’Malley returns nods of greeting around the table, and settles back to work out a plan, wondering where a real detective would start. He plays poker for a living. The detective work is a hobby. It’s one that he picked up accidentally and keeps returning to because he’s a sucker for a sob story. Proven, once again, by his inability to say no to Mr Tupuola. Now he’s got to work out how to find Sefina. Harder still, persuade her to come home. He’s thinking about this, how he’s going to build rapport with a stubborn teenage runaway, when he’s drawn into the table conversation that co-exists with the game that’s being played.

‘Hey, O’Malley, how’d you finish up last night?’ Johnny asks. Johnny’s one of the regular low-limit players who’s here for the company as much as the cards. He’s a pretty average player, but he’s good-natured, polite to the dealers and waiting staff, and avoids conflict with other players. O’Malley likes him, likes all the old fellas who come to play cards because there’s no one at home and the five-dollar special is better than anything they’ll make for themselves.

‘Not bad, Johnny,’ O’Malley says. ‘Up a grand or so when I left.’

He throws some chips into the pot as he speaks, backing his pair of tens with a decent raise, which pushes most people out of the pot. Two players

call the bet, and the dealer, Frank, turns over the flop, ten-five-three, with two hearts.

Both players check to O'Malley — they want to stay in the hand, but they don't want to bet. There's no point getting clever in low-limit, and though O'Malley has three tens, which is the best possible hand right now, another heart could give someone a flush, so he puts out a pot-sized bet to defend his hand. Everyone folds. O'Malley scoops the chips in, knowing he could have played it differently and made more, but he's got a case to think about, and he's not here to break the old-timers.

Johnny isn't finished talking about last night, though, because what he really wants to do is tell O'Malley how he got unlucky.

'I couldn't catch a break. Had aces cracked by five-eight, and top set got beaten by runner-runner straight,' he complains.

It's the gambler's lament, and O'Malley doesn't pay much attention to the details. At the poker table, bad beats are the equivalent of talking about the weather. Players remember the intricate detail of the hands they were unlucky to lose, but conveniently forget the times they got lucky and won. Sometimes there's someone there to keep everyone honest. Tonight, Sunny is that man.

'You're not mentioning that you misplayed both those hands, Johnny,' Sunny pipes up, from Seat Nine. 'You made the aces too cheap, and you tried to slow-play the set. No point blaming anyone else for either hand.'

Sunny's name is ironic. He's consistently dark in mood, and this can lead to storms when he drinks, which is often. He isn't drunk tonight, though, and his needling is good-natured. But he still won't let Johnny off the hook.

Johnny makes some weak attempt to reject Sunny's criticism, but really Johnny's just enjoying the chat, because the poker room is one of the only places he feels sufficiently comfortable to make conversation, and there's a captive audience. He lets it go, and the chat moves on to other familiar subjects. Who played a hand well, who played like a fish, whether to back the Celtics or the Nets, why the casino is so poorly run, and on it goes.

O'Malley drifts back into his own world for a while, checking in with his subconscious to see what progress it has made with the task he took on

earlier in the evening. Not much, as it turns out. He figures he'll start the modern way, dedicating tomorrow to a search of social media.

Sefina may have disappeared from view, but if she's like every other teenage girl she'll still be online. The world could end, and she'll still be on Instagram checking out what Kylie's wearing for the apocalypse. That's where he'll start. He'll have the case cracked by the end of the day. Like a professional.

Approaching midnight, O'Malley makes his excuses, racks his chips, and leaves the table. He stops at another table where the real game — higher stakes, serious money — is in session. He says hello to a couple of the more heavy-duty players in the room. Big Tone and Chinese Steve (no creativity here, the names are strictly functional) are dominating the game, and when they see O'Malley they try to get him to join the action. There's a spare seat, and O'Malley's usually a definite.

'Not tonight, boys. I've got a few things to take care of.'

'Come on, O'Malley,' Big Tone implores, 'it's just getting started. Matt's in donation mode.'

'Nah, you'll all keep for another day.'

He's right. They'll all be there tomorrow night, and the night after that, because that's how it goes. O'Malley's no different — he can play twelve hours straight and feel short-changed, but tonight he's got Mr Tupuola in his head, and it's enough to make him walk away.

Chinese Steve gets up, steps away from the table, out of earshot.

'Hey, O'Malley, you still good for the game tomorrow?'

'Yeah, I'm good. Call me with the details,' O'Malley replies, patting Steve on the arm as he heads off.

Steve's got O'Malley an invite to a private game, where the stakes will be higher than the casino can offer, and O'Malley's definitely good for it. But their conversation is hushed, because it's better to keep those games on the down-low, because they're not strictly legal, and poker players are inscrutable at the table, but terrible gossips when they're not playing. Especially when

they're not invited. O'Malley and Steve keep things between themselves, because if the game is profitable, they don't want it to come to an end because someone can't keep their mouth shut.

O'Malley makes his way out, criss-crossing his way through the banks of slots that are strategically positioned to impede a quick exit. If there's a fire, everyone's fucked. They'll discover bodies trapped in the maze of machines, hapless gamblers who found themselves disoriented, running around in circles. Some of them won't even have tried, staying fixed to their seats, chasing the jackpot that's only ever moments away. O'Malley's never seen the appeal of the slots and he navigates them on autopilot, thinking only of Sefina and Mr Tupuola, and the bad luck that's been thrown their way.

CHAPTER TWO

O'Malley is a night dog. He prefers the rhythm of the city after dark. People who've finished their day jobs move more peacefully and with less inhibition. Predators and those with ill intent are easier to spot and, wherever possible, to avoid. He rarely sleeps before 4 am, often later. His body clock is set to this pattern, and he gets joy from the notion that he's winding down as others begin their slow trudge to office jobs, or to the many gigs that feed the daily commute. It's early now, just after midnight, and O'Malley heads off into the city streets, alert for any trouble that might come his way, but relaxed because the city he calls home isn't Vegas, or LA, but Auckland.

New Zealand doesn't come with a reputation for crime. But it's here, lurking beneath the surface, and O'Malley has found himself submerged in it too often to be carefree. He's unlikely to suffer random violence, though; his size alone is enough to send people elsewhere, looking for easier targets. He looks bigger than his six foot two, his wide shoulders an indication of the strength that lies beneath his t-shirt, and the definition in his brown forearms confirming it. He's learned how to use that strength, too, so it's probably for the best that his looks are enough to ward away any evil that is sharing the streets on this humid Auckland night.

The casino sits proudly in the centre of the city. It's a landmark now, many years after it first opened. The tower that dominates the city skyline is a permanent record of the exchange that took place between city councillors and those who wanted to bring organised gambling to this small corner of the South Pacific. Build us a monument, the council demanded, and you shall

have your licence to print money. And so they did. The tower rises up some 300 hundred metres and is still to this day the only notable feature of what is, in truth, a very minimal skyline. It acts as a homing beacon, guiding people to the heart of the country's biggest city, and to the gambling den that sits beneath the tower.

O'Malley stands at the bottom of the tower now, navigating his way through the taxis that sit in wait, hoping for a decent fare to make their nightshift worthwhile. The streets that surround the casino are a little quieter now, but there are still plenty of people milling about looking for one last drink. O'Malley is heading for last orders, too, and walks down Federal Street, past barber shops and convenience stores, past the rear of the city courtrooms that by day condemn men — mostly men — to the prisoner vans that now sit empty and idle waiting for the next day's passengers. A hotel sits on the opposite side of the street, offering one last taunt to the unfortunates who are heading for a different sort of accommodation. O'Malley picks up his pace as if one of the vans might suddenly open and pull him inside; ghosts from his past telling his feet to get a move on.

He works his way through St Patrick's Square, criss-crosses down Wolfe, over Fanshawe, and down to the Viaduct Harbour, where the restaurants are now closed or closing, but the bars are still clinging on to their final customers, both parties pretending that this is a twenty-four-hour city, which is definitely not the case unless you're in the casino or McDonald's. It's a sleepy part of the world, and the population is too small to sustain around-the-clock entertainment and wouldn't have the inclination even if it were available. But for night owls like O'Malley, there's always somewhere to go, and his destination tonight is particularly welcoming.

Nestled between two large, sterile establishments catering for tourists and post-work office crowds, The Brandling is an altogether darker establishment, less inviting from the street outside. Inside, the lighting is warm, giving the place a womb-like cosy feel that is timeless. It's been this way for as long as O'Malley has been a customer, and while the neighbouring bars require constant reinvention, the formula for success that The Brandling

follows is actually very simple. Good staff, good lighting, and good music at the right volume makes your drink taste better and your spirits lift.

The bartender stands imperious behind the long wooden bar that stretches the length of the room. She is as striking as when O'Malley first laid eyes on her, her long, dark hair matched by her sleeveless black blouse and black jeans. She wears no discernible make-up, but still her eyes shine bright, holding a hint of amusement, as if sharing some private joke with the customers who cluster around the bar.

There are still a couple dozen people enjoying themselves in The Brandling, and O'Malley threads his way through to the bar, narrowly avoiding the wild, gesticulating arms of a twenty-something girl who dressed for a night of glamour, but is now nearing her bedtime. She spills her drink but takes it well, and O'Malley keeps on moving towards the bar to avoid getting pulled into her vortex. She'd be too much for him to handle at this time of night.

'Well hello, O'Malley,' the bartender says softly. 'Not upsetting my customers, are you?'

'Hey, baby,' he replies. 'How's your night been?'

'Pretty slow, tonight. I was hoping you'd come by,' she says, stretching her long, ink-covered arm towards him and placing a glass down on the bar. She throws some ice in the glass and pours him a double Zacapa rum. Claire has been gently improving his palate in the year since they met. Civilising him. House-training.

'Have a drink with me. If it stays like this I should be able to finish up early, and if you're entertaining me I might let you take me home.' He accepts the challenge. In fits and bursts when she's not at the other end of the bar serving drinks, he tells her about his visitor earlier that evening, and the task he's taken on.

O'Malley passes muster, and scores the invitation back to Claire's apartment, which is a twenty-minute walk from the bar. They live apart, but part of the deal is that O'Malley does the cooking in both kitchens. He makes Claire a simple pasta, combining spaghetti with cherry tomatoes, basil, capers and a

little anchovy, and opens two bottles of a local IPA while she showers. As he plates the spaghetti, Claire comes back into the kitchen, wearing some irresistible pyjama shorts and a cropped t-shirt, her damp hair leaving small traces of moisture on the thin cotton that clings to her upper body. O'Malley pushes aside an altogether different kind of hunger, and places dinner on the countertop that separates the kitchen and lounge. Claire leans back onto a bar stool and takes a long drink from her beer bottle.

'Oh, that's good,' she says. 'Well done, O'Malley.' Using his last name, like everyone does.

'I'm glad you approve. I hope the food is up to scratch.'

'Your worst efforts are better than my best attempts,' she says, twirling the pasta around her fork and taking a bite. 'And yes, it's good.' Still with her mouth full, a smile in her eyes.

As she eats, O'Malley is happy to sit in silence, appreciating the simplicity of her beauty, and how fortunate he is to have times like these, just sitting down and watching her eat. His life hasn't always been so simple, and it is moments like this that remind him of his past. He still carries demons with him, picked up in childhood and never fully shaken. His appreciation of what he has to be grateful for is significant. More so, perhaps, than if he'd had an easy life, with no darkness against which to appreciate the light. He mulls this as he watches Claire lay down her fork and turn her attentions from the food to the man in front of her. O'Malley's no philosopher, but she's one hell of a psychologist — midway through a doctorate — and can read his tells better than anyone he's encountered at the poker table.

She senses he's in an introspective mood, approaching melancholy. She opts for distraction, focusing him on the challenge of finding Sefina.

'I don't want to teach you how to suck eggs, but you need to look for the boy,' she says.

'What boy?' O'Malley says, startled from reflection to confusion.

'When a fifteen-year-old girl goes off-reservation, nine times out of ten there will be a boy — or, more creepily, a man — at the heart of it. Your case doesn't sound like someone hiding out at a girlfriend's house. The father would have chased that down already. I think you're looking for a boyfriend

who's slightly left-field. If he was in her inner circle, they'd already be busted, and your client would have given you two names, not one. Look for the boy, and you'll find your girl.'

Who needs a pretend detective when you've got a wise woman to hand? O'Malley loves how she humours him with words like 'client' and 'case'. He's taken on many lost causes in recent years, but makes no pretence that he's qualified to consider himself a private eye. But once he takes on a task, he pursues the truth doggedly. In Claire's view this is reason alone to give what he does legitimacy, licensed or not. She doesn't always like where O'Malley's searches take him, but she respects his need to help others, and shows that respect in the words she uses when she talks to him about his efforts. The psychologist in her also has a very clear explanation for why he does what he does, but she leaves that unsaid.

O'Malley thinks about what she's suggesting.

'OK, I get what you're saying. I'd got as far as boy.' He's the sleuth, after all. 'And what you're saying about him coming from a different circle makes sense. But it could be simpler than that. I suspect the father is a traditional, religious man — he'd probably react badly to any hint of boyfriends — so she might have been hiding a relationship even if it's within their community.'

'Maybe. But her friends wouldn't risk their own parents' wrath to protect her. More likely, they just don't know where she's gone. Besides, with your charms you'll soon have them spilling what they know, and my bet is that they're as worried as her father.'

'Hmmm.' O'Malley's not so keen to apply his charm to a bunch of teenage girls. If Claire's theory is right, there's little point anyway. If she's right, it's going to be even harder to find the girl.

'It wouldn't be satisfying if anyone could do it,' Claire points out, standing up to clear her plate as she speaks. 'Sleep on it and see where your day takes you tomorrow. Right now, I need you to clear your mind of teenage girls and start focusing on the woman in front of you.'

O'Malley needs no encouragement to put the Tupuolas out of his mind, as Claire takes his hand and leads him to the sofa. She curls herself against him and turns the screen on. They are halfway through season two of *The Wire*.

Second time around. They've both watched the whole thing in previous lives, but it's even better on second viewing, and it's the one show they agree is *their thing*.

Another reason O'Malley thinks he's different from real private eyes. Despite his tough, gambler/detective exterior, he loves the escapism of a good TV show. Unlike the paperback heroes he discovered when he began to read in earnest, O'Malley doesn't like jazz, has no faithful dog to walk on the beach, and his relationship with alcohol is loyal and uncomplicated. Like most everybody in the real world, he likes to turn on the TV and escape into someone else's world.

In truth, their progress with McNulty and Bunk has been slow. They've been on the same episode for the past couple of weeks. They get distracted. Claire's shorts have risen up as she curled into O'Malley, and he is finding far more satisfaction tracing his fingers over the smooth contours of her thigh than from the happenings in Baltimore. Soon they are messing around, and when he begins to softly kiss Claire's neck just below her earlobe, things get serious. Claire wordlessly puts the TV on pause and leads O'Malley towards the bedroom, poor old Idris Elba looking on with frozen jealousy from the living-room screen.

O'Malley gently extricates his arm from under Claire's neck, making every effort not to wake her.

'You're going home?' she mumbles, not even half-awake.

'Yes, baby. I'll call you,' he whispers as he slips into his jeans. He doesn't sleep over, nor does he let Claire sleep at his place. It's a rule he established at the outset of their relationship, and one that only a woman with Claire's empathy and understanding would accept.

He has his reasons. O'Malley suffers night terrors. When they occur, he'll scream and shout the house down, and on occasion wake to find bedside furniture strewn across the room, victim to the residual violence he carries within him. He's given up replacing lights to read by, and his bedroom is now a shrine to minimalism. The need to sleep alone is driven from a fear of harming someone else when the terrors strike. Shame plays a part, too, but