

A Pale Moon *was* Rising

Eamon Foley, #2

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.



Chapter 1

Jacob Butts scurried across the room, leapt up onto a stool and reached out to the statue of The Virgin Mary on the mantelpiece. 'Thank you, Lady. Thank you, thank you.'

Leaning forward he kissed the statue's feet. The excitement that bubbled through him made it difficult for him to breathe but still he did a little dance on the stool. He couldn't believe what was happening. Never in his wildest dreams had he expected this. Four of them. There were four of them coming. He never had that many before. Four! It was usually just the one, sometimes two. He never had a problem with just one or two. One or two were easy to manage.

Then in a heartbeat, the excitement turned into a heavy lump of apprehension. Could he handle four? What about the time three of them turned up? He wasn't expecting that either and it nearly turned into a disaster. Luckily it didn't. But it nearly did. And now there were four of them coming. Anxiety was beginning to overwhelm him and he struggled even more to catch his breath.

He looked back at the statue. Trust the Lady? Yes, trust the Lady.

He leapt off the stool and scurried back across the room to the large rug just inside the front door. He tugged at the edges, making sure it was lying flat and unruffled. He needed it to be invisible.

Then he studied the large mirror at the edge of the rug. That had to be just right too, positioned so that it was almost invisible as well.

But suddenly it was too late. The boards creaked on the wooden walkway outside the door. The handle gave a soft groan as it was tested. They were here.

Jacob Butts sprinted back across the room and threw himself into his big leather armchair near the fireplace, and he flinched as the door crashed open. They were the usual sorts, big men in long coats and assorted hats. And carrying big sticks.

The first two through the door looked straight at Jacob Butts, raised their sticks and charged. And when they ran onto the rug it folded beneath them and they disappeared down the hole.

The third man stopped dead with his feet on the edge. His stick flew into the air as he flapped his arms like a wild bird trying to lift off from thick mud. He almost managed to turn around but the fourth man was already too close and slammed into him. He flipped forward and dropped like a sack of potatoes down on top of his pals.

He might have screamed, but Jacob Butts didn't hear him. He was too busy wondering what the fourth man was going to do.

But the fourth man was one of life's followers. He depended on others for guidance. He needed directions. On his own, he couldn't think fast enough. And now he was flummoxed. He wasn't even a proper member of the gang. He was only

there to make up the numbers. The others didn't want him to come in the first place, but he clung to them like a bad smell. They warned him that if anything went wrong he was on his own.

And now it had. And he was.

Raw fear turned into a dark rage. He had a huge face, like a full moon but without the light. He bellowed something as he pointed at Jacob Butts, skipped around the edge of the rug and launched his attack.

When his reflection came out of nowhere and flew towards him he was even more flummoxed. But he was moving too fast and he slammed into the huge mirror that he hadn't even noticed. The glass shattered. He grabbed his face and howled like a wounded animal. But he stayed on his feet and staggered towards the small man in the big armchair.

Jacob Butts leapt up and grabbed the poker from the rack near his feet, and in a blind panic, he threw it in the general direction of the man. It was a fluke, but the poker flew like a javelin. The man ducked but misjudged the throw. The poker hit him in the eye with the force of an arrow and threw him backwards down the hole.

Shock pinned Jacob Butts to the floor. All thoughts had poured out of his head and left just a blank grey space. The only thing that registered with him was his heart beating at twice the normal rate and sucking the oxygen out of him. Any minute now he was going to faint. He was struggling to fathom out what just happened. From start to finish it had probably taken less than half a minute, but it had frozen him in time. He wasn't sure if he'd ever get back to normal again.

With considerable willpower, he shuffled across to the hole and peered down. The first three men were dead, the spikes from the steel contraption on the floor protruding from various places. The fourth man was still twitching, but it wouldn't be for long.

And the pigs in the sty directly below them were hysterical with the promise of what was to come as the blood poured through the grill and splattered down all over them.

Chapter 2

Thomas Kinsella hummed softly to himself as he cycled home along the road to Blennerville with the River Lee on one side and the ship canal on the other.

The only cloud in the early morning sky was the usual clump that blew in from the Atlantic and got stuck on top of the enormous Brandon Mountain, Ireland's second-highest peak. Stretching the whole length of the Dingle peninsula, the mountain range shimmered in a haze that softened it so much it appeared to melt into the silver water of Tralee Bay.

Patches of mist still hung over the wetlands around the River Lee. The tide had gone out and the river had settled back down to its normal level, but it left behind a muddy lake sprouting wild reeds and hardy bushes. Mudlarks sang as the water sucked at the riverbank.

On the other side of the road, a flock of seagulls screeched around a small boat that was taking cargo up the canal from Blennerville to Prince's Quay on the edge of Tralee town.

And in front of him the shell of the enormous windmill standing guard on the other side of the Blennerville Bridge gave him a wonderful feeling of being welcomed home.

Kinsella loved this time of the day. He'd finished his night shift and was heading home to Rose and the boys. The cows would be milked and the chickens fed, and his breakfast would be on the table. He took a happy breath in through his nose. On such a beautiful morning it was easy to forget there was a war raging in Europe.

Thankfully the war was turning now. The Allied forces had landed on the beaches of Normandy and were pushing the Nazis back to Germany. But like a cornered rat, Germany was still dangerous. The outcome was never certain.

It had been an unusually busy night for Kinsella. Manning the switchboard in the Ballymullen Army Barracks was the most boring job in the world. Normally it was twelve hours of sitting on a hard chair with his senses dulled by the big earphones he had to wear while waiting for someone to call. If anyone did call it was usually before midnight. Then the rest of the night crept along like a snail in a cabbage patch.

But last night the calls didn't stop. A farmer swore he saw a submarine off Kerry Head. The lookouts dotted along the Dingle Peninsula said they couldn't see anything. Another caller insisted that a boat had landed near where he lived. The occupants seized a car and were heading for Dingle town. Regular Army and Local Defence Volunteers were dispatched. The Gardaí and the Local Security Volunteers were out in force.

Eventually they all converged on a motor mechanic's workshop in Dingle. The distressed owner told them that three men in naval uniforms had dragged him out of bed and forced him to repair a length of fuel pipe. Then they tied him up and disappeared.

Despite the intense efforts of the Irish Security force, they couldn't locate the men or the sub. At the end of his shift, Thomas Kinsella was still no wiser as to what actually happened. Part of him wanted to hang back to see what developed, but he was too tired and hungry. He needed to get home. He was sure he'd know soon enough if there was any more news.

When he saw an army truck rumbling over the Blennerville Bridge he slowed down to let it pass, and as it got closer the driver recognized Kinsella. He pulled into the side of the road and wound the window down.

'Isn't it a grand morning, Tom?' He spat a cigarette butt onto the grass.

'Jerry, how's yourself?' Kinsella braked and leant his outstretched hand against the front of the truck. 'You haven't been out all night, have you?'

'We have indeed.' Jerry gave a weary roll of the eyes. 'Chasing feckin' shadows. Some auld farmer swore he saw a submarine and they sent the whole army out to look for it. Utter madness. We were falling over each other, demanding identification from people we work with every day. No one knew what we were supposed to be looking for. The blind leading the feckin blind, if you ask me.'

A young soldier jumped out of the back of the truck, leant over the low wall and started to be sick. Jerry rolled his eyes again. 'My driving can't be that bad. It must be something he ate.'

The corporal sitting beside Jerry snorted and looked at the soldier in the wing mirror. 'The last thing we had to eat was that pot-mess in the canteen, and that was ages ago. So if it was the pot mess wouldn't we all be spewing up?' He poked Jerry with his elbow. 'No, it's you weaving all over those winding roads in this auld truck. It's all right for us up here in the cab, but what about the poor eejits in the back having their guts shook to bits?'

'Ah go away with yourself.' Jerry poked him back. 'If you think you can do any better...'

But the corporal wasn't listening. He was watching the soldier staggering back to the truck with his arms flapping and his mouth wide open in a face that was wild with shock.

'What's wrong with that eejit now?' The corporal was already opening the door. Then they heard what the soldier was shouting.

'A body. There's a body in the mud. There's someone stuck in the mud.' He vomited again and sagged to his knees. Jerry and the corporal jumped down and followed Kinsella over to the wall. The body of a man was on its back. He was wearing a shirt and tie, a dark suit and dark shoes. As more soldiers scrambled out of the truck and bunched up around him, the corporal was forced to react.

'Right, you two climb over and pull him out of there.'

There was a shocked yelp from a ginger-haired lad who practically threw himself back behind the others. 'What? Me? No, no... I'm not... I can't even swim.'

'Swim? You don't need to swim. What's the matter with you, you yellow piece of shite? Get back over here and...'

'I'll do it.' The walls on both sides of the Blennerville road was only about three feet high and a foot wide with a layer of grass on top. Big Patrick O'Donnell threw his leg over it and tested the density of the grass and weeds behind it to see if it would give him enough support to stand on. 'I've pulled animals out of worse places than this. Especially the sheep. That's where the saying follow like sheep comes from, you know? One dopey sheep jumps into a dyke and the rest follow to see what he's up to. They're stupid, the whole feckin' lot of them.'

He was talking fast to mask his anxiety. After about six nervous steps he reached down and grabbed the front of the man's jacket. And he found that grabbing a lump of sheep fur and pulling it out of a dyke was nothing like dragging a twelve stone body out of the mud. O'Donnell changed his grip and tugged again, but the body still didn't move.

'Move over.' Mick Griffin appeared and grabbed one of the man's arms. O'Donnell took the other arm and together they dragged the body back to the wall. Others leant over and helped to lift the body onto the wall, then they all stepped away from it, unsure of what to do next.

'Who is he?' someone asked, but no one seemed to know. He looked young, in his twenties, but the side of his face was caked with blood and it was hard to see it clearly.

'Search him,' the corporal instructed. 'He might have something on him that'll tell us.'

But all he had in his pockets was a half-crown and a handkerchief.

‘Has anyone gone for the guards?’

They all pointed at the ginger lad who was already halfway across the bridge and heading for the phone box.

Chapter 3

The excitement was bouncing off the walls as Eamon Foley walked in the door to the Tralee Garda Barracks. The people who normally disappeared like mist in a breeze the moment their shift ended were still hanging around, huddled in lively groups puffing on cigarettes and talking in animated bursts.

‘What’s going on, Dennis?’ Foley leant on the front desk where the duty officer Dennis Reardon was busy trying to listen to the buzz around him.

‘We’re after being invaded.’ Reardon’s eyes were all over the place, unable to settle on anything because of the anxiety that was oozing out of him. ‘Last night. Submarines everywhere. Boats came ashore all along the Dingle...’

The phone rang and he grabbed it as if was a life raft. ‘Hello, Tralee Gardaí... yes...what? ... oh, right... what? Now?’

Foley looked around for someone sensible to talk to. He spotted the chunky shape of John Guerin and shuffled over to him. The bearded guard spun around when he got the poke in the back and his bright eyes crinkled in amusement. ‘Eamon, it’s yourself. And how’re you this morning?’

‘What’s all this about being invaded, John? Is it...’

Before Guerin could answer an older man butted in with a wave of his hand. ‘There were submarines spotted all over the place last night. Two off Dingle and another by the Maharees. Another two were trying to get into Fenit, obviously to capture the oil terminal there.’

Foley realized his hands were shaking and he had to clamp them together. He had prepared himself for this moment ever since the war started. Yes, Ireland was neutral. Promises were made by Hitler that he would honour it. But there was still a nagging worry that one day when the time was right, the Germans would look at Ireland in a different light. Now that the Allies have landed in Europe and were tightening the noose on them, Ireland would be a prize worth taking. If the Germans could breach the backdoor to Britain, would the allies have the resources to stop them?

Foley’s instinct was to rush back home to warn his sister Vicky, prepare her for the worst. Then get over to the school and find his son. Then what would he do?

‘Right, fall in!’ The shout was loud enough to witch off the noise and make every head turn towards Sgt Jack Fitzgerald. He barged through the doors into the muster hall and went straight to the table at the front, slapped some papers down on it and watched the duty team troop in behind him and grab a seat. After a lot of shuffling and scraping of chairs they settled down and the silence was total. No one wanted to be the one to attract a glare from the six feet six ex-army Sergeant Major.

'Right,' the accent was Kerry but the edges had been smoothed by his time as a student in Rockwell College. Tanned and fit, he had a sharp mind and the unnerving ability to look at someone and tell instantly if they were lying or not. It was something to do with the unconscious twitches of the face muscles. Just in case, everyone avoided direct eye contact with him.

'Let me tell you a story about an officer in the trenches during the last war,' he said. 'He sent a message back to Headquarters saying 'Send reinforcements, we're going to advance.' However, by the time the message went along the lines and arrived at the HQ it had become 'Send three and fourpence, we're going to a dance.'"

The look on his face was hard to read and everyone glanced at each other, uncertain whether to laugh or not. They decided not to.

'And that's very much what is happening here right now.' The Sergeant picked up a sheet of paper and slammed it back down on the table again. 'If I believed all the stories I was faced with when I came in this morning I'd be manning the barricade on Blennerville Bridge.'

This time there was a ripple of nervous chuckles but it didn't last long.

'So now I'll tell you the real story. There was only one submarine last night, and that wasn't spotted until it was leaving Irish waters. The first anyone knew about it was when four men entered a farmer's house near Dingle. One man stayed with the farmer's wife while the others forced him to drive to the nearest boatyard where they got a mechanic to repair what he thinks was a piece of fuel pipe. Then they tied him up before taking the farmer home. Then they disappeared into the night never to be seen again.'

He checked the piece of paper again and looked up, scanning the room to make sure everyone was paying attention.

'And we're not even sure of the nationality of the submarine. The farmer said they all wore dark overalls and the one who gave the orders sounded more like Noel Coward than Herman Goering. And before they left they shoved five English pound notes down the shirt of the mechanic who fixed the fuel pipe. They also left some English pound notes on the farmer's table. However, that could be a classic case of misdirection. All we do know for sure is that they...'

The door flew open and Guard Reardon rushed in. Sergeant Fitzgerald stopped him with one of his withering glares and Reardon immediately shrunk to half his size as he crept up to the table and handed him a note.

The Sergeant snatched the piece of paper, scanned it then dismissed Reardon as if he was swatting a fly.

'Foley, Guerin, get on your bikes and meet Guard Mitchell over in Blennerville. He's after finding a body in the river. See if you can be of any use to him.'

Foley sprang to his feet, light with the relief that the threat of invasion had evaporated. Guerin was slower. As he eased himself out of his chair his sluggish movements gave the impression that he was lethargic and slow to react. Many a criminal found out the hard way that he wasn't. Because he spent most of his spare time at the handball alley slapping a ball around as part of the Kerry International team, he had developed the reactions of a feral cat. The first time Foley saw him in action he was left speechless. They'd cornered a notorious thug who was determined to resist arrest and squared up to Guerin, raising his fist to

attack. But before he'd even got his arm up to shoulder height Guerin had danced around him and kned him in the back of the thigh. Both the thug and Foley were transfixed by the speed of it all.

Chapter 4

The body was still lying on the wall when the two guards cycled up. Someone had put a grey blanket over it, and Guard Mitchell was keeping watch by the edge of the road. He seemed to know every car that passed, giving them a wave and having a word with the ones that stopped to enquire what he was doing standing there at this time of the morning. He had the bearing of an efficient local policeman, fit and lean like a greyhound. He watched Foley and Guerin approach and gave a casual nod.

'Is this your man?' Foley leant his bike against the wall and took a peek under the blanket.

'It is.' Mitchell pulled the blanket right down so they could see him properly. The man looked young, mid-twenties with a strong square face and thick black hair. His eyebrows were thick and black too.

'Is he local?'

'He's not from out this way, that's for sure,' Mitchell said with absolute certainty. 'But he could be one of the lads who work in the mill.' He nodded at the big stone buildings that filled the space around the windmill on the other side of the bridge. 'I wouldn't know any of them myself. Unless I had cause to, which would be rare to tell you the truth. They're mostly good lads, no trouble at all.'

'So who found him?'

Mitchell's eyebrows rose at the question and a flash of irritation crossed his eyes. 'So who found him? Weren't you briefed about this?'

Foley stepped back. 'As a matter of fact, we weren't. All we were told was you're after finding a body and we were to go and help you with it.'

Mitchell gave a look that said it wasn't unusual but it still annoyed him. He sucked at his teeth and stood up to his full height. 'Well, some army fellas spotted him this morning and they called me.'

'Some army fellas?'

Mitchell nodded. 'Yeah. They were out all night chasing submarines. On their way back to town this morning they stopped here for some odd reason, and one of them spotted the body.'

'Maybe they thought the submarine was coming up the basin,' Guerin chuckled.

Mitchell forced a chuckle too but his eyes stayed serious. 'Anyway, they pulled him out and sent for me. They searched him to see if they could find out who he was, and obviously, I checked that too. But there was nothing on him except a half-crown and a handkerchief. Nothing to tell us to who he is.'

Foley looked over the wall. The tide had turned and the river was falling back to its natural level. 'So where do you think he was washed up from?'

'Oh, he didn't come in on the tide. He was too far up the bank for that. And his clothes are dry, not like they would be if he was bouncing around in the sea all

night.' Mitchell gave a sweep of his hand. 'No. I'd say he went over the wall right here. He could have been in a fight, which would explain the state of his face.'

'Or he could have been attacked and robbed, hit with something and tried to escape by jumping over the wall.'

'He didn't jump over the wall.' Mitchell lifted the other end of the blanket. 'If he did his shoes would be covered in mud. But they're not so I'd say he was thrown over it.'

Foley took a closer look at the clothes the man was wearing. The suit was well worn with leather patches on the elbows. The shirt was frayed and the knot on the tie was shiny from constant use. The shoes were scuffed and the laces shredded at the ends.

'He doesn't look too well off, by the cut of him. But I suppose someone worse off than him probably wouldn't notice that. They saw an opportunity on a dark road and took a chance. Then things went too far so they threw the body over the wall thinking the tide would take it away.'

'You could be right.' Mitchell lifted the man's left hand and pointed to the chunky ring on the second finger. 'And I bet they'd be cursing if they found out they missed this piece of expensive-looking jewellery.'

The ring appeared to be solid silver with an intricate pattern on it, tiny symbols that could have been foreign numerals or letters. Foley tested it to see how easy it would be to pull it off. It moved freely. 'It's a bit big for this fella's finger. What do you think, is it his or did he... you know? Acquire it?'

'What if he was knocked down by a car or something?' Guerin gave a tight-lipped shake of the head. 'If it was dark. His clothes are dark. Maybe someone ran into him and just didn't stop. If they were going fast enough and they hit him hard enough the impact might have thrown him over the wall.'

'I thought of that,' Mitchell stepped onto the road and waved along a stretch of it with his finger. 'So I looked for skid marks or any other sign on a collision over about twenty feet in both directions. But there's nothing to indicate that anything hit anything else in this immediate area.'

He went back to the body and tugged the blanket back over it as a truck approached from over the bridge. Then he took a packet of cigarettes from his top pocket. 'I hope one of you fellas has a match,' he said as he put a cigarette in his mouth and held out the packet. He waved to the driver as the truck rumbled past and Foley cracked a match and held it out to him. Then Foley took two cigarettes, handed one to Guerin and lit the both of them.

'Anyway, as I was saying, we expect people to walk on the right-hand side of the road so they'll be facing the oncoming traffic.' Mitchell blew out a cloud of smoke with his words and he wiped a bit of tobacco from his lip. 'So we can assume your man was walking back towards Tralee because he was on this side of the road. So how tall would you say he was? Five ten?'

They both took another look and nodded.

'Well, the army truck that found your man this morning was still parked here when I arrived. And as I came around on the inside I nearly cracked my head on the big wing mirror that was poking out of it. Now there was an awful lot of activity around here last night, army trucks and police vans all over the place. And like you said, he had dark clothes on him. Now if the lads were all geared up for action

their minds would be focused on other things. So what if one of them hit him and they didn't even realize it?'

The three of them looked back at the body again and they all took a long drag on their cigarettes.

'I suppose they'll be able to tell us a bit more when they do the autopsy,' Guerin said.

'If they do one.' Foley was well aware that the system was under enormous pressure at the moment, bogged down by the weight of refugees who flocked to Ireland to escape the war in Europe. Because of the increased death rate, natural and unnatural, autopsies were only carried out when clear evidence of suspected foul play was presented. Then it had to be authorized by the Garda Commissioner.

'Well, maybe the detectives will come up with something.'

'That's wishful thinking.' Mitchell crinkled his nose as if there was a sudden bad smell. 'That big fella with the belly that he can't get a shirt to fit was here already. Now, what did he say his name was again? Casey?'

Both Foley and Guerin groaned. Casey was so hopeless they only sent him on cases that didn't require a great deal of brain power. And usually alone, because no one else wanted to be contaminated by the doziness that dripped off him.

'I told him what I was thinking but he just looked through me as if I was talking out of the wrong hole. His face said he was the detective and what did I know. He didn't even wait till the Doc came.' Mitchell gave the slightest shake of his head and smiled. 'I didn't get around to mentioning the silver ring in case he took it with him and it got lost somewhere between here and the town.'

'Speaking of the Doc, where is he?'

'He had to go to a suicide case in Castleisland first, then a suspicious death over in Clash. Hopefully, he'll come here next. I'm not happy about keeping your man lying there on a wall all day.'

The sun was already throwing down a sharp heat and Mitchell wiped his eyes with his fingers. It was going to be a glorious day.

'If you want to go and get yourself a cup of tea or something, I'll stay here and keep an eye on things,' Foley offered, but Mitchell waved it away.

'No, I'm grand. As soon as they take the body away I'll sneak off home. But thank you anyway.'

'You're welcome. So what would you like us to do? We feel useless just standing around here.'

Mitchell looked back at Blennerville village. 'Well, if he was coming from that direction, the question is what was he doing out here in Blennerville? Was he visiting someone, or was he having a drink with friends? Or was he just out for an evening stroll?'

'At that time of night?' Guerin sniffed.

'Well, we don't know what time he ended up here,' Mitchell turned to the body. 'All we do know is the time the army lads found him. From the condition of him it's obvious he wasn't lying there that long, so we're only assuming it was dark when he met his end.'

'You're right, I suppose,' Guerin conceded.

‘Anyway, it would be a great help if you could wander around the village and ask if anyone remembers seeing him yesterday. Try the shop and the pub, and anyone else you meet. If you wouldn’t mind.’

‘It’s a pity we haven’t got more to go on. A name would be good, or better still, a picture.’

‘Maybe we could mention the ring,’ Guerin tapped his finger. ‘It’s an odd lookin’ thing, that’s for sure. The kind of thing you’d notice if you were in close proximity with him.’

Mitchell grinned again. ‘Wasn’t I thinking that myself? I was even going to suggest taking it with you.’

Guerin lifted the blanket and raised the hand, but as soon as he pulled the ring off the finger he practically threw it at Foley. Foley caught it like it was red hot, pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it in it. Mitchell was already scribbling a description of the ring in his notebook, adding the time and date. He got both of them to sign it.

Chapter 5

As they crossed over the Blennerville Bridge Foley tried not to look at the ominous grey ruins of the old windmill shimmering in the harsh sunlight. Built in 1800 by the Blennerhassett family, it used to grind corn for the local population and also for export to Britain through the busy Blennerville port. Huge granaries and storehouses sprang up around it. But by 1880 several major events had overtaken the windmill—the introduction of steam power and the opening of the Ship Canal in 1846. Finally, the building of Fenit Harbour meant the windmill couldn’t compete anymore and it was abandoned.

And for as long as he could remember Foley got the strangest feeling whenever he was near it. An irrational sense of foreboding as if the empty shell of what was once Europe’s biggest windmill was haunted by some shadowy secrets.

He was about ten years old when he first felt it. He was heading out to the tide for a swim when he spotted some school pals jumping into the still black water between the lock gates at the entrance to the canal. Naturally, he joined them.

He was used to swimming in the sea, but this water had a coldness to it that stunned him when he jumped in. He went down like a stone and the water wrapped itself around him in a grip that almost caused his heart to stop. For one dreadful moment, he felt his end had come. He was going to die right here and no one would ever find his body. He was just going to sink right down and be swallowed up by the mud. He couldn’t do a thing about it. He was petrified. There was no way out.

Then something slammed into him and shocked him into action. He made a frantic burst for the surface, shooting out of the water at the same time as one of the other kids.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ the lad cried. ‘I’m sorry I landed on you. Are you all right?’

Foley spluttered a yes as he swam to the iron ladder and pulled himself up onto the edge of the lock. And when he looked up the first thing he saw was the

windmill in the distance, shimmering and menacing, pulling his senses towards it. He swore it was staring at him with an evil intensity. His throat became so tight he could hardly draw breath.

Then one of his pals slapped him on the back and dared him to jump back in the water. He couldn't. He pretended to have a cramp in his leg.

Now as he cycled over the bridge he realized that Guerin had stopped and was leaning against the wall. He'd taken off his cap and was shielding his eyes with his hand. Foley turned around and cycled back to him.

'What a beautiful day this is,' Guerin sighed. 'It's a grand day for a spot of fishing. I might take myself off in a boat this evening and try my luck.'

'Aren't you playing handball?'

'Naw. My partner Joseph Green has a few days off so he's taking his missus to Killarney for a bit of a holiday.'

Foley gave a splutter. 'What'll Eileen say about that? You have a free evening and you're not going to take her out somewhere?'

'Ah, she won't mind. She'll be glad to have me out of the house.'

'Because you won't tell her, will you? You'll pretend you're out there training for the handball tournament.'

'Of course, I'll tell her. What do you think I'd...?'

'I don't think—I know. You'll look her in the eye and you'll lie like a hairy egg.'

Guerin snorted and put his cap back on, pushed himself off the wall and cycled past Foley back onto the road. 'Where are we going first?'

'We should try the pub over there. They're having a delivery so there's someone up and about that we can talk to.'

The dray horse on the pavement outside the pub had a feed bag over his head and he was munching happily after dumping a pile of manure on the ground behind him. The delivery man was rolling a barrel of porter down the chute into the cellar and shouting instructions to his assistant. He watched the two guards lean their bikes against the pub wall and stroll in the front door to the bar.

Coming in from the bright sunlight made them stop and take a moment for their eyes to adjust. Chairs were piled up on tables and a young woman was sweeping the floor. She looked up when she heard the door clatter open.

'Lads, we aren't open yet. You'll have to...,' her bright green eyes scanned the two men and when she registered the uniforms her hand went to her throat and her expression changed instantly. 'Da, you're wanted.'

It still amazed Foley how people react when they're approached by a policeman. It varies from fear to guilt and hits all the bases in between. The innocent immediately think something has happened to their loved ones, and the guilty ones become aggressive and defensive.

'What?' A head appeared behind the forest of stools that were stacked up on the counter. He had the same bright green eyes as the girl but most of his hair was gone. He compensated for that by growing what was left into a pigtail and letting his sideburns reach right down to his chin. He looked the guards up and down and rolled his eyes.

'Eleanor, will you go into the office and get the liquor license.'

Foley put up his hand. 'No, no. We're not here about that.'

The young woman propped her broom against a table and came over. 'So what do you want? It's a bit early for a pint, I'd say.'

Her long hair was the colour of a fox and she had it pulled back and tied with a black band so that it hung over one shoulder. And the smile she gave was as bright as her eyes. And completely infectious. Foley couldn't help smiling back. But then he checked himself. The reason they were here was nothing to smile about.

'Well, ah... we called in to ask... ah...'

Foley realized he was staring at her but he couldn't help himself. She had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen. Guerin pushed between them and held his hand out to the man behind the counter.

'Good morning, sir. I'm John Guerin. And that is Eamon Foley.'

'Mike Carmady.' The man gripped the hand and smiled as he shook it. 'I'm the landlord. Eleanor is my daughter.'

'How do you do,' Guerin smiled back at him. 'We're sorry to bother you so early in the day but we... well, there's no easy way to say this but we're after finding the body of a young man back there on the road to Tralee.'

'Jasus,' Carmady straightened up and would have taken a step back if he had space behind the counter. 'Do you know who he is? Is he a local lad?'

'That's what we're trying to find out.' Guerin leant his elbows on the bar. 'Guard Mitchell thinks he's not from out this side of the town.'

'Well, if Tom Mitchell says he's not from around here you can take his word for it.' Carmady tapped the counter in emphasis. 'Tom knows everyone and their dog around here. A pig can't fart without Tom Mitchell knowing about it.'

Guerin took out his notebook and flicked it open. 'He's about five-ten, early twenties with thick dark hair. You didn't notice if he was in here last night?'

'No. There was just the usual crowd, I think.'

'What about around town? Did you notice anyone like that wandering around? It's possible he was just out for a walk when he was killed.'

'Killed?' Eleanor gasped and staggered back against the bar. 'What do you mean killed?'

'Jasus, I'm sorry.' Guerin put his hand out to steady her. Foley grabbed a stool off the counter and helped her to sit on it, and Carmady rushed out from behind the bar. He pushed Foley out of the way as he put his arm around his daughter. 'C'mon now, girl. I'm sure the guard didn't mean to upset you. He was just...'

'I'm sorry,' Eleanor covered her face with her hands. 'I wasn't listening properly. I thought you said you caught a young man... you know? ... arrested someone. I didn't realize you were talking about a dead body. Oh my God. That's dreadful. What happened to him?'

'Right now we don't know,' Guerin told her. 'But he didn't drop dead from something natural.'

'Oh dear God,' Eleanor repeated. 'That's horrible.'

Foley reached in between her father and Guerin and took her hand. 'Will I get you a drink of water or something?'

'No, no. I'm grand.' She held his hand tightly for the briefest of moments then let hers drop into her lap. 'I'm grand now. But thank you all the same.'

A beam of sunlight coming in through the large pub window flooded that corner of the bar and in the sharp light, Foley noticed that Eleanor wasn't as young as he first thought. He'd put her down as late teens but now he could see the soft lines around her eyes and the corners of her mouth that said she was in her mid-twenties, much closer to his age.

She slid off the stool and lifted it back onto the counter. The three men stood looking at her and a flash of embarrassment danced across her eyes. 'I'm grand,' she insisted. 'I'm sorry I caused a fuss. It's just... well, it's not every day something like this happens around here.'

Guerin gave her one of his understanding smiles and looked back at his notebook. 'Right, as I said, the first thing we have to do is find out who he is and what was he doing in Blennerville last night. Where was he going when he was...' He glanced at Eleanor but she was studying her hands and didn't seem to be listening again. 'So we thought we'd check in here first just in case he'd called in for a pint of the black stuff.'

'Well, I had the night off so I was out.' Carmady scratched his chin. 'But Eleanor was here. She'd know.'

They waited for her to react, but she didn't.

'Eleanor?' Carmady patted her on the arm and she looked up sharply.

'What?'

'The guards were wondering if maybe he came in here last night. Did you see him at all?'

'No, I didn't.' She knew she'd answered too quickly and she brushed her hair with a quick sweep of her hand. But she didn't look at her father. 'He didn't come in here last night.'

There was an awkward moment before her father cleared his throat. 'Are you sure, girl?'

'I am.' She gave an annoyed click of her tongue. 'It was quiet in here last night. Just the usual crowd, Mick Carroll, Sonny Lynch, Pat the Pipe. It was dead in here. I'd have noticed if some stranger came in. I wouldn't have been able to miss him, would I?'

She pushed past her father and practically ran towards the office door. At the same time, a young man popped up behind the counter.

'Just the two barrels today, is it, Mr Carmady? I'm after putting them in the cellar for you.'

'Eugene,' Carmady had started to go after Eleanor but went back behind the counter instead. 'Close that hatch before someone falls down it and breaks their feckin neck. There's a good lad.'

It took a moment for Eugene to realize there were other people in the bar and he squinted through the legs of the stools to see who it was. His face stretched in shock when he saw the uniforms and his instinct was to turn and bolt but Carmady was blocking his way. Eleanor came back out when she heard his name and she took his hand, giving him a strange look that was almost pleading.

'Eugene was in here last night and he didn't see your man either. Did you, Eugene?'

'What?' Eugene's eyes were all over the place, wishing he was somewhere else. Eleanor poked him with her finger.

‘Tell them, will you?’

‘Tell them what?’

‘That you didn’t see any stranger in here last night. The only ones in here were the usual lads.’

‘What are you talking about?’

The noise Eleanor made in her throat could have been a curse but she covered it by putting her hands over her mouth. ‘Eugene, the guards are after finding a dead man on the roar over there and they’re asking if he came in here last night. I told them he didn’t. I didn’t see him, and you...’

‘Yeah, I saw him.’

The silence came down so hard the only sound was the noise from the street outside. Eleanor’s head gave an involuntary shake and she stepped back away from Eugene.

‘So you did see your man?’ Guerin said. ‘When was that?’

‘When we were coming out here this morning. Guard Mitchell was standing by the road so we stopped and asked him if he was all right. He told us about the fella he found in the river and he gave us a brief description of him just in case we might have seen him around.’

Guerin’s eyes disappeared into frustrated slits and he wriggled his nose. ‘And you didn’t recognise the fella?’

‘Jasus, he didn’t let us look at him.’

‘I mean from the description he gave you. You didn’t see anyone of that description in here last night. Or any other night for that matter.’

Eugene’s eyes were still dancing around the room searching for an answer. They settled on Eleanor again and he grimaced, a shadow of uncertainty crossing his face. Eleanor just stared at him until he looked away again.

‘No, I never saw him before.’

‘Never?’

‘Never, and that’s the truth.’

Guerin glanced at Foley and raised his eyebrows, then he shut his notebook and slid it back in his pocket.

‘Ah, well, I suppose we’d better be getting on. Nice meeting you all.’ He smiled at Eleanor whose face had softened again. ‘I’m sorry if we upset you with the bad news. But I expect Eugene would have told you all about it soon enough.’

‘He would,’ Eleanor smiled back at him. ‘And I’m sorry I’m such a cry baby when it comes to things like... you know... dead people? Ever since my mammy died I...’

‘Eleanor,’ Carmady spoke sharper than he intended and she flinched. ‘Don’t be upsetting yourself now, child. Why don’t you go and make yourself a nice cup of tea? And maybe one for the guards too.’

‘Not for us, thanks,’ Guerin waved the idea away.

‘Are you sure? It’s no bother.’

As Eleanor brushed past him Foley held out his hand. She looked at it suspiciously before taking it in a soft gentle grip.

‘I was wondering...’ but his mouth had dried up. He felt his face redden and he cleared his throat. Eleanor’s eyes sparkled with wicked humour as she waited for him to continue. ‘Well, just that if you do remember anything... you know... drop

into the barracks and let us know. I'm Eamon. Foley. Eamon Foley. And this is John Guerin.'

Eleanor couldn't hold back the chuckle any longer and she let go of his hand. 'I will of course.'

Guerin was already pulling the door open. 'Will there be anyone at the mill this time of the day?' he called back to Carmady who glanced up at the clock.

'Yes. They start at six and they're on the go till ten tonight.'

'We'll be heading over there, then. Thank you, Mr Carmady. And don't forget, if you hear anything...'

'I will, of course.'

Chapter 6

Jacob Butts raked through the remains of the bonfire with a long stick. He needed to make sure all trace of his four visitors had well and truly turned to ash. Then he opened the metal gate in the wall and tipped the ashes into the river.

He still hadn't fully recovered from the shock of having so many people call on him like that. It was not good for his nerves. He loved the brilliant rush of adrenalin that he got when one or two people called. But what happened last night was almost too much for him. He didn't think he could ever go through that again. He asked the Lady to limit it to two from now on. The next time, if the head count was more than two, he would pull up the drawbridge and lock the door.

Still, he did very well out of them this time. It was obvious they'd robbed other people on their way to his house so there was much more cash on them than usual. He always made a point of only keeping the cash. It was too risky to keep anything else in case it was traced back to him. So he put it in the old metal box and lower it into the deep pool in the river. The only way anyone would ever find the box would be if they were swimming there. And that was very unlikely.

But the money meant nothing to Jacob Butts. What was important was the benefit to his pigs. He glanced over at the huge animals with enormous pride. The three Large White Ulster boars were grunting and snorting around the yard while the four sows lay happily on their sides in the slurry as the piglets fed off them.

Some of them should be ready for the next market. But that was a whole month away now. A tug of impatience made Jacob sigh as he swept the last of the ashes away with a hard brush. He would need to keep busy until then. It seemed such a long way off.

Jacob Butts loved his day at the market. He loved the buzz and the banter. And he loved the attention he got from the other traders. The buyers would study his animals and ask how he got them to be so big and healthy. What was he feeding them? Where could they get some of it?

So he made a point of never agreeing on a sale until the afternoon, just to drag out his day. Then he would stuff the money into his shirt pocket and head down to the Grand Hotel for a hearty meal and a mug of ale.

Afterwards, he would wander off home, content and slightly inebriated.

Yes, he was so proud of how things were going right now. For a moment he wished his father was here to witness it.

But only for a moment. Because Jacob's father, John Joe Butts, was a brute. Small and wiry, he had spite running through him like a stick of Blackpool rock. He was like an angry terrier, snapping and growling at anything and everything. And Jacob spent his whole life in fear of him.

So Jacob knew he wouldn't get an ounce of credit for all his hard work. The sweat, the tears that he wept trying to keep things going would invoke only ridicule.

Consequently, when John Joe had a stroke and died just before Christmas the only feeling Jacob could muster was of relief. Of course, he went through the motions, the sad face, the choked voice at the funeral, the obligatory tears as he read out the urology.

Later as he was going through his father's things he realized that he knew absolutely nothing about his father. There were no letters, no photos, no paperwork of any kind to say where he came from. Or to say if he had any other relatives, living or dead. There was a Marriage Certificate giving the date when John Joe married Ann Quinlan, a Birth Certificate for Jacob. And a Death Certificate saying that Ann had died in childbirth.

Jacob had no recollection of his childhood. It was as if his whole life had been written in chalk on a blackboard, one day at a time. Then it was wiped off again when the evening came.

If only they had been like a normal family. If only they had spent some time together. If only they had a proper conversation once in a while Jacob Butts might have learnt why his father was like he was. Why he was so bitter, why his life had been so terribly sad.

Chapter 7

'Where were you all morning?' Sergeant Fitzgerald bore down on Foley with an angry swagger.

John Guerin had disappeared towards the canteen the moment they got back to Tralee so Foley was left to take the full force of the sergeant's attack.

Foley stepped back a couple of paces. 'We were out in Blennerville like you told us, Sarge. We were helping Guard Mitchell.'

The sergeant stepped forward by the same amount. 'All this time? I needed you here, Foley. We're shorthanded enough as it is without the two of you gallivanting all over the place. So what were you doing that took so long?'

'Well, the dead fella had nothing on him to say who he was. Guard Mitchell said he wasn't a local lad so he asked us to knock on a few doors to see if anyone had noticed him hanging around the area.'

'He was a non-national?'

Foley blinked a couple of times. 'I don't know, Sarge. How could you tell that?'

'By the cut of him, of course.' The Sgt flapped his huge hands. 'Did he look foreign?'

‘Well, no. I’d say he didn’t look foreign. But how ...’

‘And why did you have to go knocking on the doors? What was Mitchell doing? It’s his patch. He should be the one making the enquiries, not taking advantage of my good nature.’

Sgt Fitzgerald manoeuvred Foley back towards the front doors. ‘Anyway, I want you to find Guerin and get over to the hospital. There’s a family causing trouble because they’re refusing to treat their drunk father who fell and broke his nose.’

‘But what about the dead fella out in Blennerville?’

‘That has nothing to do with you anymore. Mitchell found him so Mitchell can sort him out. I can’t spare anyone to babysit him anymore.’

Foley took the ring from his pocket and held it out to the sergeant. ‘The dead fella was wearing this. I thought if I took it over to Dean Callaghan, the jeweller, he might recognize it and we might be able to identify the body.’

The sergeant snorted and pushed the ring away. ‘Why would he recognize that auld thing? He must see thousands of them every day.’

‘I know that, but I just thought it was worth a try.’

‘Why have you got it? Why isn’t Mitchell doing that?’

‘Because I’m pals with Dean Callaghan, Sarge. And the ring has a distinctive design on it, see?’ He held the ring up to the light but the Sgt just blew a sigh and didn’t look at it. ‘I thought Dean might be able to recognize it.’

‘No.’ Sgt Fitzgerald flapped his hands again. ‘I can’t spare you for that. When you write up your report put the ring with it. Now find Guerin and get over to the hospital.’

‘But Sarge, we might be able to solve this quickly. If we can find out who the dead fella is we might be able to find out why he was killed. And who killed him.’

‘Who said he was killed? I thought it was a suicide. Detective Casey said he floated in with the tide.’

‘No, he did not.’ Foley almost laughed but decided to cough into his fist instead. ‘It looks like he was hit with something then thrown over the wall. The tide was nowhere near him.’

‘For God’s sake.’ Fitz rolled his eyes. ‘All right, but you’ll have to do it during your break time.’

‘What? But I’m just after getting back and I’m dying for a cup of tea.’

‘Foley, I need your ugly body out there doing what you’re paid to do. Now if you want to go around pretending to be a detective, that’s fine by me. But not on my time. Is that clear? Now the choice is yours. Give it to Detective Casey or take it over to your pal. Either way, I want you and Guerin over at the hospital right now. Is that understood?’

All Foley could do was nod.

Chapter 8

Dean Callaghan gave an exaggerated groan when he saw Foley and Guerin coming in through his shop door. ‘Lads, keep an eye on these two. They’re a shifty pair if ever I saw one.’

The girls behind the counter chuckled nervously as Dean beckoned the guards into the back room, and he took up his usual position behind his workbench.

'This is John Guerin,' Foley pointed with his thumb as he put the ring on the bench in front of Dean. 'We're wondering if you recognize this, by any remote chance.'

'Hello,' Dean nodded to Guerin then studied the ring for a moment before gingerly picking it up. 'What're you up to this time, Eamon?'

He put his magnifier to his eye and rolled the ring between his fingers.

'We're just interested in who owns it, that's all.'

'Yeah,' Dean gave a mocking grin. 'I always worry when you come in looking for information. It never ends well, and that's for sure.'

Foley gave him a pretend slap around the head. 'I told you he was useless, didn't I?' he said to Guerin. 'I only come in here because I haven't got the time to go to a real jeweller.'

'He won't go to a real jeweller because he'd have to pay for their time. The last time he opened his wallet there was an almighty scream out of it. The poor thing had almost healed up and here he was ripping it asunder again.'

Dean seemed to be talking absently as he studied the ring. He sat back, put the ring and the eyeglass on the bench and folded his arms.

'Mixer Daly.'

'What?' Foley stepped closer and looked at the ring.

'It belongs to Mixer Daly.'

'Mixer Daly, from out in the Spa?'

'The very same. I thought you'd recognize the name.'

'But...' Foley felt his heart sink. Mixer was at least fifty years old, much older than the body in Blennerville. 'Are you sure about that? Are you sure it belongs to Mixer?'

'Absolutely.' Dean picked up a pen and waved it at the guards. 'Listen, there's not a month goes by without Mixer and his lunatic family coming in here with something they want me to buy off them? Usually, something a relative left him in a will, God rest their poor soul. A silver candlestick, a solid gold watch, a diamond-encrusted salt cellar. You name it and Mixer was left it in a will. There can't be much room left over in the Spa graveyard after they've planted all of Mixer's relatives in it, and that's for sure. '

He gave a raucous laugh and Guerin chuckled too, but Foley picked up the ring and rubbed the symbols on it. 'So he brought the ring in to...'

'They swarm in here like a mob of mad monkeys,' Dean was in full flow now that he had Guerin's attention. 'They cause as much confusion as possible to distract the staff while anything that isn't nailed down accidentally falls into their pockets. Or down their jumpers. Or even into their pants.'

He clicked his fingers and gave a satisfied nod. 'So now when we hear them coming we all go into the shop and watch them like the proverbial hawk watches a rat. And you should see the look on their poor faces. The Virgin Mary herself couldn't look as innocent as them.'

'Dean, when did you say Mixer came in with...?'

'Did you know it was because of Mixer's gang that my father had the whole place re-designed?' Dean came around the bench and steered Guerin back into the

shop. 'You'll notice that all the display trays are elevated so that the customer can see the merchandise. But I bet you didn't realize that the glass tops slope away from you. And the counters are higher than a normal shop counter. They're also deeper than the length of an average human arm. And,' he waved at the back of the counter, 'the display can only be opened with the release catch under the counter. So in theory it's impossible for someone to just reach over and grab the stock.'

He practically dragged Guerin back behind the counter again. 'And this end cabinet is on wheels. When you push it forward to close the gap it latches onto the other counters. So the only way you can get behind it is by jumping over it. And the glass is the hardest you can get. It takes a lot to break that, as Paddy Harty found out.'

He glanced back at Foley for confirmation but Foley wasn't listening. When he suddenly noticed everyone looking at him, he shrugged. 'What?'

'Paddy Harty, remember? He ran in here with a big claw hammer and gave the glass a fierce wallop. But the hammer only bounced off it and the claw caught him on the nose. He shot off down the town and the guards took their time rounding him up. They had a great laugh making him explain how he got the battered nose.'

'Oh right. I remember Liam Edge telling me about that.'

Dean wiped the glass with his sleeve and gave the shop an admiring glance before heading back into the workshop.

'Dean,' Foley tried to keep the impatience out of his voice. 'When exactly did Mixer come in with the ring? Can you remember when he sold it to you?'

'Oh, he didn't come in to sell it.' Dean wriggled back onto his stool and leant his elbows on the bench. 'No, no. He was wearing it, and he wanted me to cut it off his finger for him. Apparently, that ring was passed down from father to son for the last hundred years or more. From what I understand, the symbols are an ancient blessing that keeps the wearer safe from harm. And it's supposed to guarantee fertility as well, to secure the family line.'

'And you believed him?' Foley sniggered. 'You didn't think that maybe he tried it on his fat little finger after he acquired it, and it got stuck?'

Dean raised his eyebrows so high they almost touched his hairline. 'Yes, as a matter of face. I did believe him.'

'Why?'

'Because he was terrified that I'd make a mess of it. He believed that if the symbols were corrupted in any way the blessing would become a curse and dreadful things would befall the wearer.'

Foley dragged up another stool and sat on it. 'Then why would he risk having it cut off in the first place?'

Dean licked his lips. 'Because the ring is passed down to the first son when he reaches twenty-one. That's the rules. And Mixer's son was going to be twenty-one years old the next day. Unfortunately, from the time Mixer inherited the ring to the day he had to pass it on he had become somewhat larger. His fingers were so big the ring was almost buried in the surplus tissue. He had no choice but to have it cut off.'

Foley held the ring up to the light. 'But I can't see any cut on it.'

‘Of course, you can’t.’ Dean yelled. ‘It’s me you’re talking about. I’m an expert. You won’t find any evidence of my work. Anyway, Mixer made it plain that the symbol must not be changed in any way. So I made a copy in wax, cut it with a fine tool then put it back as precisely as it was before. It’s impossible to tell that it was ever touched.’

‘So he gave it to his son that day?’

‘Yes. His oldest son, Paudy. They had some sort of ceremony where he was presented with it.’

Foley tried to remember if he’d ever met Paudy. ‘Can you describe him for us, Dean?’

‘I’d say about five feet eight or nine. Well built. Dark curly hair.’

Foley put the ring back in his pocket. ‘That’s grand, Dean. We appreciate your help.’

‘So what are you doing with it, anyway,’ Dean was reluctant to see them go. ‘Are you saying the eejit sold it to someone? I mean, he wouldn’t risk the curse, would he?’

Foley gave him a wide grin and put his cap back on his head as he followed Guerin out the door.

Chapter 9

As Jacob Butts swept the last of the bonfire ashes into the river he couldn’t help looking up at the three-story house behind him. And he had to admit that it was an impressive piece of work. He just never understood why it had been built here, right on a river bed with a steep bank behind it. The house was dug into the riverbank.

It was also upside down. The living room was at the top, with the front door level with the ground above. The bedroom was on the middle floor, and the bottom floor was given over to the pigs. Jacob didn’t know the story behind it.

There was so much he didn’t know. He didn’t know that his father John Joe was the youngest of five brothers born to Seamus Butts and his wife Mary.

He didn’t know that his grandfather Seamus Butts had an unhealthy craving for power. It smouldered inside him most of his life, ever since he was just a lad travelling the length and breadth of the country looking for work. Usually for slave wages and the scraps from the landowner’s table.

Seamus bitterly resented those rich and arrogant landowners. He begrudged the way they preened themselves while the poor workers were expected to bow and scrape around their feet, doffing their hats and keeping their eyes on the ground. The workers were nobodies. He saw people die in accidents and the gentry didn’t even know their names. Their only concern was how soon they could be replaced. The show had to go on.

And it also fascinated Seamus that people assumed the rich were wise and sophisticated. No matter how ill-informed they were, people accepted their opinion as inspired and significant. No one saw the sham behind the veneer.

Yet Seamus still craved a piece of that life. He dared to dream of something better than the life he was living. It tormented him because he couldn't see how to make it happen. There was no way off his chosen path. This was his destiny.

Then one day he arrived at Maggie Elliott's place looking for work. The land was poor to begin with, and now it was seriously neglected. He almost walked on by but he was weary, cold and hungry. So he took a chance and knocked on the door of the dilapidated cottage.

Maggie looked as if she was on her last legs too. Her husband had died and she was struggling just to stay alive. There was no way she could ever pay him in money. But if he had nowhere else to go, Seamus was welcome to help out around the farm. All she could offer him was shelter and a share of whatever food she had.

Seamus knew instantly that this was his moment. For the first time in his life, he would be setting the pace. To show Maggie that he was sincere he gathered a pile of firewood, snared a couple of rabbits and cooked them a proper meal.

It took many long hard years to turn the farm into something useful, during which time Maggie began to look on Seamus as the son she never had. So when she died from flu during a long bitter winter, he inherited everything.

But it wasn't enough. Seamus wanted more. He wanted Ned O'Driscoll's massive spread at the mouth of the valley. But between Seamus and O'Driscoll there was a strip of farmland that belonged to Jack Flavin.

Flavin's two sons were long gone, one to America, the other to Canada. Their daughter Mary was a nervous girl who came across as a bit simple. She was still in her teens when Seamus offered to marry her, on the condition that she alone inherited the land.

The Flavins were delighted. They were even more pleased when Mary gave them a grandson, and another one shortly after that. But each time a grandson was born Seamus manipulated the agreement and secured a bit more of Mary's inheritance for himself. By the time the fourth grandson arrived Seamus had merged most of Flavin's land with his own. The Flavins were left with just their house and a small plot. Now Seamus was right next door to the O'Driscoll's farm. And the closer he got the more he craved it.

A river ran through the Flavin's land. During one particularly bad winter when the rain hadn't stopped for weeks, a huge chunk of the bank mysteriously collapsed causing a massive dam. People swore they heard a strange thud at the time but they assumed it was thunder. The raging water backed up for miles and spilt over into the fields above the O'Driscoll's farm. And it wasn't long before it became a massive lake. Eventually, the sheer pressure caused a breach. And the wall of mud and water that roared through it was so severe it washed away all of O'Driscoll's crops and drowned most of his animals. The barns, the sheds and most of the house were battered beyond repair. No one died, but the shock left O'Driscoll traumatized. He couldn't face having to start all over again. Seamus made him an offer and he accepted without hesitation.

Now Seamus owned the whole valley. At last, he was one of the landed gentries. But the rumours never went away, so the image he had of himself differed greatly from the one his neighbours had of him. And it confused him. Why wasn't he respected by his peers when he was as rich and important as they were? The anger ate away at him.

The fifth son, John Joe, was born prematurely. He was so frail it was touch and go whether he lived at all. And no one cared anyway.

Because Seamus Butts was so obsessed with becoming the most powerful landowner in the county, a sick child meant nothing to him. If it lived, it lived. If not, no harm done. After all, a child was just an extra mouth to feed. Or an extra pair of hands to toil on the farm.

As soon as his children could walk Seamus expected them to work. They were out of the house by 5 am and not allowed back until 8 am for breakfast. But only four places were ever set, and the last child back went hungry until lunchtime. Being first back was not a good thing either. It meant closer inspection of your morning's work. And a vicious beating if Seamus found fault with it.

So every scrap of humanity was crushed out of those boys. Their life was reduced to basic survival. Only the toughest made it through the day. And the meanest. Being the youngest and the smallest, John Joe spent most of his life aching from hunger. The others danced around him, took the credit for his work, pointed out his mistakes to deflect attention from themselves.

His mother Mary wasn't any help. Her whole demeanour told you she wasn't very bright. And Seamus treated her like he treated his dogs, viciously and brutally. She was just another pawn in his quest. And when Mary was found dead at the bottom of the stairs the rumours became even more vicious. The stress brought on a fatal heart attack and Seamus died one month after his wife.

The land was divided between the five sons. John Joe got the same number of acres as the others. But his piece was the worthless strip that bordered the river, all rocky ground and uneven scrubland.

The oldest son claimed the house and evicted the others, and John Joe had to find shelter in what was left of the O'Driscoll's old house. He had no choice but to sell his share of the animals to his brothers. He kept the donkey, the pony, four pigs and a boar. And the statue of the Virgin Mary which he took down to his secret place on the river, a small cave where he used to hide from his brothers.

The cave was on a bend with a high bank on either side that was covered in thick undergrowth. Getting down to the cave was extremely awkward, a narrow path which John Joe only found by chance. When the water was low, that part of the riverbed became a wide patch of dry stones.

He put the statue on a ledge in the cave and turned it into a grotto. And he knelt in front of it.

But as he prayed he felt the grotto wasn't big enough. The Lady needed more space, so he started to scoop some earth out of the little cave. And he was amazed how easily the earth came away.

The next time he came down to the grotto he brought a shovel. And he used the rubble that he dug out to build a solid platform on which he built a crude shelter in which to rest.

Because he needed to eat, John Joe had no choice but to work for his brothers. And they treated him as badly as they treated all their workers. Sometimes even worse. And the resentment raged inside him, a fury that had no release. It was only when he went to his cave and dug away at it that he could exorcise the demons, casting them out with each shovelful of earth. Sometimes he dug

relentlessly, unable to quench the anger and frustration until he fell exhausted into his makeshift shelter.

The more earth he dug out of the cave the bigger the platform got until eventually, it was over five feet above the waterline. And one day he had a sudden thought. Why not turn the makeshift shelter into a proper house? It was possible. He could use what was left of the O'Driscoll cottage.

So every evening he piled bricks and timber onto an old cart and got the donkey to haul it to the top of the river bank. Then he used a pulley system to lower it down to the riverbed. And within one year he had completed a single-story house and a lean-to for the pigs.

He met Ann Quigley at a pig fair and together they became successful pig breeders. When they added another floor to the house they turned the bottom floor over to the pigs. Instead of building stairs on the inside going up to the new floor, they created a slope in the yard going up to a door on the side.

When Ann announced she was pregnant they added the third floor. As the house got higher it left a gap of about ten feet between the new front door and the top of the river bank. John Joe designed a footbridge that could be pulled up like a drawbridge, in case they weren't in the mood for visitors. He also rigged up a bell system that alerted them whenever anyone stepped onto the bridge.

It was Ann's idea to put the stairwell just inside the front door and a trapdoor in the floor above the pigsty. John Joe designed a lever system that enabled the stairs to fold back against the wall. Then when the bannister was removed and the trap door was opened, there was a drop straight down to the pigsty.

That way they could strap the pigs into a harness and haul them straight up to the front door instead of spending half the morning trying to coax them up the steep path when they were ready for market.

Ann died giving birth to Jacob. And John Joe never forgave him.

Chapter 10

When Vicky McCarthy heard the tap on the front door her heart gave a little flutter. She practically danced over to the small mirror above the kitchen sink and checked her hair, giving it a gentle pat.

Instinctively she touched the scar that ran from her forehead to her cheek and gave her eye an unnatural droop. As she got older it didn't look so angry anymore and the droop wasn't so prominent. The natural folds of the skin helped to camouflage it now. Obviously, it was still noticeable. The eyes are the first thing people focus on so there was no hiding it.

But Stefan didn't seem too bothered by it. At least she didn't think he was.

She turned when the kettle on the range puffed and started to rattle, and she pushed it onto the back plate, straightened her dress and went to the front door.

The big awkward seaman stepped back and for a brief second his face lit up. He gave a slight bow.

'Hello.' He seemed to struggle to get it out.

'Hello yourself,' Vicky beamed.

'How are you doing?' Stefan shifted from one foot to the other. His voice was a deep rumble with a nervous stiffness to it.

'I'm good, thanks.' Vicky glanced up at some people who were walking past and when they nodded she smiled back. 'I'm very good indeed.'

'I... it is my afternoon off. I was walking this way and I... how are you?'

Vicky had to bite on the laugh as she stepped back and waved him into the hallway. Stefan rolled his cap in his hands and took slow hesitant steps.

'Would you be wanting a cup of tea?' Vicky pushed the door shut behind them and guided him into the kitchen. 'The kettle's boiled so it's no bother.'

As Vicky moved the kettle back onto the hot plate and took the lid off the teapot, Stefan took a paper bag from his pocket and handed it to her. Vicky took a quick look inside.

'Tea? You brought your own tea?'

'I thought it would help your rations. You have a lot of people to look after here. I hope you don't mind.'

Vicky felt such a surge of affection towards the big man that she almost hugged him. But instead, she waved him towards the chair by the table. She scanned his face, wishing she was better at reading people. She tended to accept them by how they reacted to her. But she was never able to see what was really behind the mask they wore.

But there was something about Stefan that she liked from the first time he knocked on her door - his awkwardness, his big open face that had a shadow of a lost soul about it. Someone told him she had a room to rent and he was so disappointed when she said she didn't that she invited him in for a cup of tea. He was reluctant at first but Vicky insisted. So he followed her into the kitchen and sat on the inside of the table with his back to the wall. And in a heavy Polish accent he told her he was an engineer on a small cargo ship out in Fenit. He explained how the ship had been captured by the Germans when they invaded Poland and how they were forced to take provisions to the German front lines across Europe. Knowing they could be attacked at any moment by British warships created tension that made Stefan physically sick. He had never known fear like that before in his whole life.

Of course one day their luck did run out. British gunboats engaged them. But miraculously Stefan's ship managed to avoid being hit and they escaped in all the smoke and noise. And somehow they ended up off the Scottish coast.

At that time no one believed Britain could survive a war with the superior German forces so the captain set course for neutral Ireland. He had some obscure link with Limerick and decided to go there. But without proper charts, they ended up in Fenit in Co Kerry where they claimed asylum.

Despite initial hostility from other boat owners, Stefan's captain rented out his ship to some Kerry businessmen. They needed to transport their goods from Fenit to Tralee and Stefan's vessel was ideal for negotiating the canal.

Now Stefan had enough of living in the cramped mess deck with all the other crewmen so he went looking for a place of his own.

Vicky had been so engrossed in his story that she forgot the time. When the children came charging in from school yelling and screeching as they competed for

their mother's attention, Stefan looked flustered. He thanked Vicky for her kindness, pulled his cap back on and left.

She didn't expect to see him again. So she was pleasantly surprised when he called a week later to tell her that he'd found a room above a shop in the Square. She asked him in for a cup of tea and this time he didn't argue.

Vicky was so comfortable in his company she found herself telling him everything about her own life, how her husband Joe McCarthy was shot dead in a crowded pub and no one was ever caught for it, how she was left with five children, how she was forced to leave her home and move back into her mother's tiny house in Creamery Lane. She left out the part about Joe McCarthy being a thug who beat her senseless.

They were on their second cup of tea when the children crashed through the front door again. And again Stefan became flustered. Why was that? Did they remind him of something? His children, perhaps? He gave the impression that he had no relatives in Poland, no one waiting for him to come home. But what if he was lying, hiding some dark secret?

Vicky forced herself to stop thinking like that. She would never admit it but she was hoping there was more to Stefan calling on her a second time than just coincidence. Dare she hope that he would call again?

Now here he was. And this time he was much more relaxed.

'So how's the job going?' Vicky pulled out a chair and sat on the opposite side of the table.

'Good,' Stefan nodded. 'It is good. I think the other boat people don't mind us so much now. They do not suspect us anymore, you know? They thought we were German spies, maybe? So now it is good.'

When Vicky noticed the clock on the wall behind Stefan's head was coming up to three o'clock she groaned inside. She was enjoying her time with him. Why did he always call at this time of the day? He must know the children would be coming home from school around now and she'd have to give them all her attention. Was he doing it deliberately, so that they couldn't get too... what... intimate? But if he felt that way, why call on her in the first place?

'Yes, the job is good now,' Stefan was saying. 'And the money is good. It is a pity that there is no good stuff in the shops to buy with it.' He gave a rumble of a chortle and his eyebrows rose with his wide smile.

Vicky nodded. 'Things are hard all right, but maybe they'll get better soon now the lads are winning the war.'

She had a sudden thought and looked up, and she realized that Stefan was thinking the same thing.

'So maybe you'll be able to go home again?'

'Maybe,' was all he said, and he took a swig of his tea.

When she heard the front door open Vicky got up and put the kettle on the hot plate. Then she took the frying pan off the rack and put it on the range beside the kettle. When she turned around she was surprised to see Eamon standing there instead of one of the children.

'Oh, what are you doing here at this hour?'

'I'm sneaking in for a quick cup of... oh, hello.' Foley nodded at Stefan who stood up and moved around the table. Vicky put her hand on Stefan's arm.

‘Stefan, this is my brother Eamon. Eamon, this is Stefan. Stefan is the sailor I told you about. He works on a boat out in Fenit. He’s from Poland. He was looking for a room to rent, remember? He called to tell us he’s got one now. Over a shop in The Square.’

As Foley put out his hand Vicky realized she was talking too much. She turned back to the range and shuffled the frying pan around. Stefan took the hand and shook it vigorously.

‘I am very pleased to meet you.’ He looked Eamon up and down. ‘But you are home from work now so I will say goodbye.’

‘No, no. Don’t go on account of me. I’m not staying.’

‘I hope you’re not skiving.’ Vicky wagged a finger at him. ‘You know Sergeant Fitzgerald will have your guts for garters if he catches you.’

‘Well, it’s all his fault. He wouldn’t let me have a proper break. My throat is as dry as a tinker’s sock for the want of a nice cup of tea. So if he doesn’t want me fainting on him he’ll just have to lump it.’

‘Why wouldn’t he let you have a break?’ Vicky handed him a mug and he took a long swig of the strong sweet tea. ‘What job has he got you doing that you can’t have a break?’

‘Well, it’s not my favourite job and that’s for sure.’ Foley nodded for Stefan to sit back down and he also took a chair by the table. ‘I have to tell some poor woman that we’re after finding her son’s body out in Blennerville.’

‘Oh my God,’ Vicky made the Sign of the Cross. ‘The poor woman. That must be the worst news a mother can ever get. But if it’s out in Blennerville why have you got to do it?’

‘Cos I identified the body.’

‘What? You knew the poor fella? Who was it? Is it someone I know?’ Vicky put her cup on the table and plonked down on a chair.

‘He’s from the Spa. Paudy Daly?’

Vicky shook her head. ‘I don’t think I know that name. How do you know him?’

‘I don’t. The thing is he didn’t have anything on him to say who he was except for a ring. It was very distinctive, with symbols and stuff on it so I took it to Dean Callaghan and he was able to trace him. Now I have to go and tell his mammy.’

Vicky waved a finger at Stefan. ‘Eamon has a horrible sergeant who gives him all the rotten jobs.’

‘Actually, this came from the Super himself.’

‘The Super?’ Vicky snorted. ‘Why on earth would he be interested in something as trivial as a dead body? It would interfere with his golf, don’t you know?’

‘Jasus, you’re so cynical,’ Foley laughed and Stefan looked bemused. ‘It’s true, but you can’t be heard saying it. Anyway, the minute he heard who the fella was he demanded action. He wants it sorted immediately.’

‘So who’s this dead fella? Some rich man’s son? God, it makes me sick the way they fall over themselves for the rich people but you won’t catch them giving a shite about the likes of us.’

Foley smarted. ‘Actually, he wasn’t rich at all. He’s from a very poor family. Well, a rough one anyway.’

‘So why is the Super bothered about that?’

‘Because they’re a hard crowd. When they hear their son has been killed they’re likely to come into town mob-handed to make sure we’re taking it seriously. So not only have I got to break the bad news to them, I have to persuade them that we’re doing everything to find out what happened to him.’

Vicky was about to say something when one of the children appeared at the kitchen door. ‘Ma, Joe is after pulling my hair and calling me names.’

Foley jumped up. ‘Duty calls.’

He swallowed the last of his tea and waved goodbye to Stefan. And then he was gone.

Chapter 11

The Daly’s cottage was set back from the road behind a forest of wild bushes and pine trees. The walls were probably whitewashed once but now they were a patchwork of green mould and flaking distemper. The tin roof looked like it was held together by rust. Rubbish littered the yard, bits of machinery, old engines, the rusty carcass of a car.

The front door was open but from where Foley was standing he couldn’t see any people inside. So he reached over the big metal gate and tugged at the latch.

And he threw himself back when the dog shot out of nowhere howling like a demented banshee and scattering a cloud of dust behind it. Spittle flew from its mouth as it threw itself at the gate, teeth bared and wild eyes almost popping out of its head. The noise coming from it made Foley’s ears ring and he was about to pull his truncheon from his pocket when he spotted the little woman sprinting across the yard shouting obscenities at the dog.

As she got closer she noticed Foley’s uniform and she stopped dead, and her face clouded even more. Her wild hair crackled with animosity and her eyes looked madder than the dog’s.

‘What the feck do you want?’ she screeched, and the dog howled louder and jumped up until his head was above the gate. ‘You can feck right off this minute before I call the lads to kick the shite out of you, you ignorant bastard. Go on, get out of...’

‘I’m looking for Mrs Daly.’ Foley got as close as he could to the gate without the dog taking a lump out of him. The woman’s arms were flying around her like the sails on a tiny windmill and she was still screaming, but Foley couldn’t hear what she was saying above the dog’s wailing.

‘Are you Mrs Daly?’

A big man appeared at the door behind them and scratched his huge belly through his stained vest. ‘Maureen,’ Foley heard him calling, but the woman didn’t even draw breath.

‘Mrs Daly, I want to talk to you about your son Paudy.’ He wasn’t sure if she could hear him above the racket.

‘It wasn’t him. You can’t pin that on him.’ She did hear him and she stepped up onto the bottom rung of the gate. ‘Whatever it is you’re trying to blame him for, he didn’t do it. It wasn’t him, so just feck off out of here.’

Foley took the ring from his pocket and held it out to her, and a frown danced across her forehead. But she pulled her head back and continued to rant.

‘Mrs Daly, it’s very important. Do you recognize this ring?’

‘No,’ she bayed. ‘It’s nothing to do with us. You’re not going to pin that on Paudy cos he was with me the whole time.’

Foley shoved it right in her face but she bared her teeth and screeched even louder.

‘Mrs Daly, I need you to look at it properly. Is this Paudy’s ring?’

‘No. I told you already, it is not. I told you. But you’re not listening to me. You’re all the feckin same, you pile of useless eejits. Anything that happens you automatically come straight out here accusing us when it’s nothing to do with us at all. So I’m telling you for the last time, it has nothing to do with us so why don’t you stick it right up your ugly fat arse and blow it out your ear.’

‘Well, I have reason to believe that it does belong to Paudy.’

The spit caught Foley in the middle of the face and made him jump back with the shock. Then the fury burst out of him and he ran at the woman and grabbed the front of her jumper.

‘I know it’s Paudy’s because I took it off his dead body this morning, you stupid bitch,’ was how it came out, and the woman made a shocked, gurgling sound deep in her throat as the blood drained from her face.

The man at the door sensed the abrupt change in the woman and he started walking across the yard. The dog did too. It sank to the ground and lowered its head onto its paws. In the sudden quietness, the only noise was the crunch of the man’s boots on the gravel.

‘Are you Mixer Daly?’

‘Mister Daly to you.’ The man looked Foley up and down, anger and suspicion flashing in his eyes. ‘You took an awful chance coming here on your own.’

‘How many people does it take to bring you bad news?’ Foley handed him the ring and Mixer looked from the woman to the ring and back at the woman again. She was frozen onto the gate, her tiny claw-like fingers wrapped around the bars and her head pressed against the top.

‘What bad news?’ Mixer had deep intimidating blue eyes and he held Foley’s stare with an intensity that unnerved him. Foley swallowed hard.

‘We found a body out in Blennerville this morning. The only identification he had on him was this ring.’

Mixer closed his eyes and brought the ring to his lips.

‘Do you recognize it, Mr Daly?’ Foley asked again.

Mixer nodded, lifted the woman off the gate and walked her back into the house. Foley watched the dog closely as he opened the gate, slipped through the gap then pushed it shut behind him.

He heard the howl of anguish as he approached the house and he took his cap off. The door opened into the kitchen and the air was thick with smoke from a turf fire. A big black kettle hung on a hook above the fire and the lid was rattling as the steam puffed out of it.

Mixer guided his wife to a stool where she perched like a little bird, and he held her shoulders and rocked her gently. His head was nodding in what looked like prayer.

Three young men also hovered around her, their faces distorted with the shock of what they'd just been told. When Foley tapped on the door and stepped inside one of them threw out his chest, pulled his lips back in an angry sneer and charged towards him.

'This is all your fault, you feckin maggot. I bet you're enjoying this. I'm going to rip your stupid...'

Foley surprised him by stepping forward too, and when their faces almost touched the lad staggered back against the sideboard.

'And why in God's name would you say that?' Foley asked in the softest voice he could muster.

'Because you're all the feckin same. You love to see the likes of us suffer. You think we deserve everything we get. You love telling us things like this.'

'Well, I promise you that is not true. I can tell you I know exactly how you're all feeling right now.'

'Yeah?' Spittle bubbled around the young man's lips which were still snarling.

'Yeah. I know how you're feeling because I felt the same way when the guards came to tell me they'd found my wife's body on the floor of a cowshed. So don't tell me I'm enjoying this.'

'Michael,' Mixer waved a bottle of clear alcohol at Foley. 'A glass for the guard.'

Foley put up his hand. 'Actually, I'm on duty, so...' But the look Mixer gave him made him nod instead. 'Thank you. That'll be grand.'

'So tell us what happened.' Mixer poured the drink into the glass that appeared in Foley's hand.

'I'm afraid we don't know exactly.' Foley sipped the drink and gasped as the home-brewed alcohol almost took the skin off his lips. 'All I can tell you is that the body of a young man was found on the road to Blennerville, and the only thing he had on him that we could identify him with was that ring.'

Mrs Daly gave a sob and Mixer squeezed her shoulders tighter. 'Was he...what was the state of him?'

'He had a wound to his head. How he got it we don't know yet.'

'What was he doing out in Blennerville anyway?' one of the young men asked.

'I was going to ask you the same thing,' Foley wiped his lips with the back of his hand and discreetly put the glass down on the sideboard.

Mixer shook his head. 'We have no idea. He was never one for telling us where he was going or what he was doing.'

'So when did you last see him?'

There was an awkward silence as they all glanced at each other. Then Mrs Daly gave a choking sob. 'Christmas.'

'Christmas? Last Christmas? That's... what? ... nine months ago? And you...'

'That's when he came home.' Mixer answered reluctantly. 'You'll have seen his record, I'm sure. So you'll know he was serving eighteen months for robbery. Anyway, he was released early for good behaviour. He came home on Christmas Eve.'

Mrs Daly glared up at Foley and pointed a long thin finger at him. 'So that goes to show he was a good lad. That's why they let him out early because he's a good lad. He isn't the evil little thug you bastards make him out to be.'

‘Sush,’ Mixer kissed the top of her head. ‘Anyway, he met up with his cousin Arthur and they said they were going out to celebrate. We never saw him again until St Stephen’s Day when they graced us with their presence for half an hour. They were both as high as kites, giggling like a couple of girls. We got the impression they were planning something... you know, exciting? Then they went back out and we didn’t hear a word from him again.’

One of the young men took the ring out of Mixer’s hand and started to slip it on his finger. ‘This should be mine now. I’m next in line. I was twenty-one in January so it’s mine now, isn’t it, Da?’

Mixer gave an angry yelp and grabbed it back. ‘No, it is not! It’s still your brother’s. No one gets it until we know... until we’re sure that he’s... that he doesn’t need it anymore.’ He put the ring on the mantelpiece and pointed at his sons one by one. ‘So do not touch it again, all right?’

‘What about his cousin?’ Foley interrupted. ‘Have you seen him recently?’

‘No. His Da was here last week and he was a wee bit anxious too. Someone told him the lads had mentioned Dublin and how good the craic was up there. So he was wondering if we’d heard anything. But I have to tell you this isn’t the first time Paudy went missing. He was still at school when he vanished for a whole year. They found him living with some travellers out in Dingle. So that’s why we didn’t worry too much about him. We thought he’d come home when he got fed up.’

‘Can you tell me if he was wearing the ring the last time you saw him?’

‘Of course, he was wearing the feckin ring. He never took it off his finger.’ Mrs Daly tried to jump up but Mixer held her down. ‘He wouldn’t dare take it off. Why would he take it off?’

‘I was just wondering,’ Foley said. ‘The thing is, a prison is a terrible place for losing things. I was just asking if he lost it while he was in there, you know? Maybe someone took it off him.’

‘No.’ Mixer swallowed the last of his drink and put the glass on the mantelpiece. ‘We were well aware of that so we made him take it off and leave it here when he was sentenced. We gave it back to him when he came home and he put it back on again.’

‘So he would still...’

‘That ring is very special to this family, Guard Foley. Paudy knew that. He believed in the significance of wearing it, and the importance of passing it down to his son. And he was well aware of the implications of taking it off unless the circumstances were so critical that he had no choice. So no, he would not have just taken it off to sell, if that’s what you’re implying.’

‘Not at all. But you can understand, we have to look at it from every angle.’ Foley reached up and took the ring off the mantelpiece, and as he put it in his pocket the same young man made a grab for it.

‘The ring is evidence,’ Foley slapped the hand away. ‘We have to keep hold of it. It’s all we have to go on right now. You’ll get it back when this is all over.’

Mixer stepped between them and Mrs Daly pushed him back with an angry swipe of her hand.

‘Where is Paudy now?’ Her voice was just a croak. ‘What have you done with him?’

‘He’s over in St Catherine’s. They took him there this morning.’

Mrs Daly jumped up and grabbed Mixer's sleeve. 'I want to see him.'
'Maureen...'

'I want to see my son. I have to see Paudy. I have to see my wee boy.'

Mixer looked at Foley and there was a question in his eyes. Foley nodded. 'I was going to ask you if you were up to coming over to identify him anyway.'

'Is he... does he look very bad? I can't have his mother seeing him if he's looking bad.' Mixer's eyes glistened and he wiped them with an angry sweep of his sleeve.

'I'm sure the nuns will be looking after him, Mrs Daly. I'm sure they'll do their best to have him looking presentable for you. So if you want I'll go on ahead and arrange a suitable time for you to...'

'Sean, get the truck ready.' Mixer helped his wife to the door and he practically shoved Foley out of the way.

'Mr Daly, we need to make sure they're ready for you. You can't just...'

'Then get on your feckin bike and sort it out.'

Chapter 12

Vicky McCarthy felt that the mood of the whole town had lightened a little bit as she came out through the arch from the market. It was a beautiful afternoon. The sky wasn't clear but the gaps in the clouds were big enough to allow the sun to shine down for long periods. The latest news from Europe was full of victories against the Germans and the shadow of invasion had moved farther away.

And Jackie Maher let her have two pork chops even though she didn't have enough ration coupons. Eamon would be delighted. He looked dreadful earlier when he'd called in for a cup of tea, pale and thin with dark shadows under his eyes. She wondered if the job was getting too much for him. He seemed to be always working these days, but that was his fault because he volunteered for any overtime that was going. She hoped he wasn't secretly saving up to get a place of his own. She dreaded the thought of having to rent his room to a stranger just to make ends meet.

She imagined Stefan living there and a strange flutter skipped across her heart. But she pushed it away. She was getting ahead of herself, starting to fantasize. But still ...

As she strolled up Rock Street nearly everyone was smiling and nodding to each other. It looked as if the whole town was out enjoying the day. As she took her keys out of her handbag she gave a little wave to the petrol pump attendant outside Rice's garage across the road.

She was surprised to find the door to Eamon's room was ajar when she stepped into the hall. She wasn't expecting him home until much later. She gave the door a light tap with her knuckle. 'Eamon, guess what I got for your tea.'

She got no response so she knocked again. 'Eamon?'

This time there was a cry and a crash and she shoved the door open. And she gasped when she saw her son Joe Jnr sprawled on the floor beside an upturned chair clutching his head.

'My God, Joe. What happened? What's going on in here?'

Joe's face was like thunder as he scrambled to his feet and tried to push past his mother. But she grabbed his arm. 'Joe, I asked you a question.'

'Let go of me.' He tried to pull away but Vicky had a handful of cloth and was holding on tight. Her stomach had turned upside down as she tried to understand why her oldest boy would be in his uncle's room in the first place.

She felt sick, and she swung him around in a circle. 'I asked you what's going on, Joe. What are you doing in here?'

'I'm not doing anything. I was just... I was... I wanted to ask Uncle Eamon for something.'

'Joe!' Vicky's voice turned into a sharp yelp. 'Do not lie to me. What are you doing in here?'

'I told you already. I wasn't doing anything.' The look on the boy's face startled Vicky. It had the same dark anger she'd seen so many times before in the face of his father. The twisted sneer, the blank grey eyes like two pebbles. Her grip slackened and he sensed her weakness, but he still couldn't pull away.

'Joe, please tell me what you're doing. What are you looking for?'

'I'm not looking for anything.' The eyes wouldn't look at her. They darted all over the room like a cornered rat.

'Then why were you standing on a chair? You were looking for something on top of the wardrobe. What were you looking for?'

'I was not...' Now the voice had dropped and became almost a growl

'You were standing on a chair. You fell off when you heard me come in. So what were you looking for?'

'I told you. Can't you understand English, you big eejit? I was not looking for anything. I thought Uncle Eamon had some comics and I wanted to borrow them, that's all. I saw him with The Beano last week and I just wanted to have a look at it.'

Vicky's eyes filled up and overflowed onto her cheeks. This was her greatest fear. Her son was turning into his father.

He wasn't even fourteen years old yet and already he had the bearing of Joe McCarthy. He was never going to be tall—his father was just five feet six—but his face was no longer that of a little boy. The angles were sharp and cruel, and the eyebrows were thick and low. His stance, legs apart and jaw jutting out, was that of Joe McCarthy himself. And it distressed Vicky so much she let go of his arm and stepped away from him.

As she turned back to the door she caught a glimpse of someone moving fast out in the hall. The front door crashed open then slammed shut again.

'Who the hell is that?' Vicky raced out but by the time she reached the street the person was swallowed up by the crowd.

But then she noticed someone glance back briefly, her ponytail flicking around her head as she looked away again and hurried down Rock Street towards the town.

Chapter 13

Eamon Foley hadn't gone half a mile down the road from Mixer's house when a battered pick-up truck went rumbling past. A second later it pulled into the side of the road and forced him to stop. Mixer wound his window down and flicked a cigar butt at him.

'Throw the auld bike in the back and climb up yourself.'

'No thank you.' Foley tried to manoeuvre the bike out of the way but he was stuck against a hedge. 'I'm grand. You carry on and I'll meet up with you later.'

Mixer slapped his hand against the side of the cab and shouted something, and two of his sons jumped down off the truck and practically pulled the bike from under Foley. They threw it in the back and when the third son leant down and held out his hand Foley had no choice but to accept their offer of a lift. He took off his cap and sat with his back against the cab, and the lads sat on either side of him. One of them gave the top of the cab a thump and the truck rumbled off in a cloud of putrid smoke.

When they arrived at St Catherine's Hospital they pulled up right outside the main door, ignoring the glares they got from the nuns who had to skirt around it to get in and out.

Foley jumped down and caught up with Mixer who was already striding down the main corridor. 'Mr Daly, you'd better let me go in first. I want to make sure everything is ready for you.'

'No.' Mixer shrugged him off and ploughed on. 'I want to see what you did to my boy. I want to see him as he is.'

'But what if he isn't ready to be seen?' Foley had to grab his arm to make him stand still. 'What about your wife? Will she want to see him as he is? Look, just give me some time to sort...'

'To sort what? What are you saying?' Mixer's breath was heavy with a mix of alcohol and cigarettes. 'What have you done to him? I have every right to see my son and you have no right to stop me. So just let go and...'

Foley tried to turn Mixer around so he could explain that normally the deceased would be cleaned up and made presentable before being taken to the chapel where the family could go to pay their respects.

Mrs Daly had climbed out of the truck and two of her sons were helping her along. 'Which way is it?'

'Mr Daly, please.' But Mixer had his face set against listening to reason and he rose to his full height with a wild snort.

'Take us to see Paudy now, Guard Foley.'

Foley glanced around at the three sons who had circled him. They were like hand grenades with the pins pulled out. Foley couldn't risk setting them off and having them tearing through the hospital like demented apes. He turned and walked back to the main door and nodded for them to follow him. 'The morgue is this way.'

As the big industrial lift took them down to the long dim corridor leading to the morgue, the smell of chemicals and disinfectant made Foley feel nauseous. The only time he'd ever come down here was when he was looking for Alex Cassidy. And the smell stayed with him for ages afterwards.

They walked in a strained silence, the clatter of their boots generating an irritating echo against the shiny bare walls. When they reached the big green

doors with the red No Entry sign Foley rushed in front of Mixer and put his hand on his chest.

‘Mixer... Mr Daly, just wait here a minute while I go and check that everything is all right. I’ll be straight back, I promise you.’

In the dim light Mixer seemed to have shrunk. Mrs Daly was hanging onto his arm and her lips moved in prayer. Mixer gave a noise that could have been a grunt and the three sons bunched up against Foley and tried to edge past him, muttering obscenities and reaching for the door.

‘Mr Daly, you can not just walk in there. You don’t know what you’ll see. Think about your wife.’

Mixer grunted and waved the boys away. ‘Just be quick.’

Foley pushed the door open just wide enough to slip through the gap then shut it immediately behind him. And he stood there for a moment as the memory of his previous visit caused a shiver to ripple through him. Nothing had changed. Three shiny steel tables in the middle of the room with a body lying on each. Four men were clustered around the one closest to the sink and the man in the white coat was doing something with a saw that made bile leap up into Foley’s throat. He gagged, grabbed his handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth.

All the men looked up at the same time and the one with the saw waved it at him. ‘Who the hell are you? You can’t just barge in here like that. What do you want?’

Foley had to swallow hard before he could answer and he wiped the wet from his eyes. ‘There was a young fella brought in here this morning. I have his family outside. They want to see him.’

‘What? No! You can’t just bring his family in here, guard or no guard. There are proper channels you have to go through. You should know that. So if you don’t mind, you’ll have to leave. Shut the door behind you.’

‘You don’t understand. This isn’t open to discussion. We have a huge problem and we can’t...’

One of the men on the other side of the table pointed at Foley. ‘Eamon, isn’t it? Eamon Foley, Mary’s brother.’

Foley squinted to see who was behind the thick rubber apron with a bandana on his head.

‘It’s Willy Diggin.’ The man held out his hand then realized he was wearing big rubber gloves so he gave a little wave instead. ‘We met when you came here a few years ago. You were looking for someone. A woman? Your friend. She was found over in the graveyard if I remember.’

‘Willy Diggin? Yes, of course.’

‘And you’re looking for someone else now? A young fella who was brought in this morning, you said.’

The man with the saw gave a growl that was heavy with annoyance. ‘Excuse me...’

Foley ignored him and went over to Diggin. ‘A young fella that we found out on the Dingle road. He was in his twenties, about five feet ten with thick black hair.’

Diggin directed him to the table on the other side of the room and lifted the cover. Foley nodded. ‘That’s him.’

The man with the saw rushed over and slapped the cover back down. 'I'm in charge here, I'll have you know.' His voice was high and shrill. 'And I'm the one who's telling you to leave right now. So go on, get out.'

Foley gave him what he hoped was a contrite look. 'I am sorry. I don't mean to interrupt your work. But the thing is I have the young fella's family outside and they want to see him. So I was hoping they could come in and ... you know, pay their respects?'

The man practically leapt a foot in the air with indignation and he puffed out his chest. 'No, they bloody well can not. What do you think this is? A feckin circus for anyone to just wander in whenever they like? You go out there and you tell them there are proper channels to go through and if they come back with the proper paperwork then we'll bring him up to the chapel where they can say their prayers over him. Now go. Go on, just feck off.'

Foley gave a long sigh and took his cap off. 'I'm afraid you don't understand the severity of the situation here. These people do not want to hear that they can't see their son. Even the Superintendent himself wouldn't have the nerve to tell them that. So I wouldn't be too quick to dismiss them.'

'So who are they, Eamon?' Diggin stepped between them.

'I don't know if you've ever heard of them, Willy. Mixer Daly, from out near the Spa.'

'Oh, my good God. Are you sure?'

'Oh, yes.'

Diggin lifted the cover again and took a closer look. 'And he's one of them, is he?'

'We believe he is.'

Diggins studied the young man for a moment then hurried across to the group that was still standing around the first table. 'Right, lads, we'd better cover this one up. Make sure nothing's showing that might cause... you know? Then go and have a break. We'll carry on when you come back.'

'What the hell are you doing?' The man in the white coat threw the saw into the sink with a crash that made everyone jump. 'How dare you stand there giving orders? You're nothing but an attendant. I'm the doctor around here and I will decide what...'

'I'm sorry, Doc.' Diggins shooed the other men away. 'But I promise you the safest thing you can do right now is allow the Dalys to see their boy. Get it over with while they're still being civil. Of course, it's up to you, but if you're going to tell them they can't come in then I'm out of here. I want to be well away from here when the shit hits the fan.'

The doc had gone as white as the coat he was wearing. He snarled, turned on his heels and followed the others out of the room. Diggin made sure the other bodies were properly covered then he nodded to Foley. Foley went over to the door and pushed it open, and he stepped back as Mixer and his wife shuffled in followed closely by their sons.

Diggin guided them to the table and waited respectfully until they were all gathered around before he lifted the cover.

Foley was looking at the ground, not wanting to see the pain on their faces, and he flinched at the pitiful whimper that came from Mrs Daly. It was followed immediately by a howl of anguish.

‘What the feck is this?’ Mixer’s voice echoed like thunder.

Foley looked up sharply. Mixer’s face was purple and his eyes bulged with fury. His wife was hanging onto him as if her legs had given out on her.

‘Is this your sick idea of a joke, Foley?’ Mixer howled again.

‘What do you mean?’ Foley stepped closer and looked down at the young man on the table. ‘But this is the young fella...’

‘This is not funny.’ Mixer tried to grab Foley’s arm but he missed and staggered back against one of his sons who steadied him by wrapping his arms around him. ‘I do not think this is funny, Guard Foley.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Foley turned to the sons. ‘I don’t understand. What are you saying?’

‘We’re saying this fella here is not our brother,’ the oldest son snarled and spittle dribbled down his chin. ‘We’re saying how dare you come to our house and tell us that our brother is dead. You dragged us all the way here with our poor mother whose heart is shattered and you keep us standing out there in that stinking corridor while you’re laughing at us. You think this is a big laugh, do you? You’re doing it to get back at us, is that it? You can’t pin any crimes on us so this is your way of taking your spite out on us.’

Suddenly they were all shouting together and the noise was deafening. Foley had to back away and step around to the other side of the table. He noticed Diggin moving back over by the sink and he shrugged when he caught Foley’s eye.

‘I don’t understand,’ Foley heard himself saying. He took the ring out of his pocket and held it out to Mixer. ‘He was wearing this ring. You said yourself it belonged to Paudy. This fella was wearing it so we assumed he was Paudy. You told me yourself it was most likely to be Paudy since he was wearing this...’

‘You haven’t heard the last of this, Foley,’ Mixer bellowed, his huge fists flying around him as if he was swatting away a swarm of wasps. His wife still hung onto him. ‘I can guarantee you of that, you feckin eejit. You have not heard the last of this.’

Chapter 14

Jacob Butts dragged the metal contraption with the spikes across the floor and into the corner of the room. Then he pulled the lever and let the stairs fall back into place.

The evidence from his four visitors had mostly dried out now leaving just a dark shadow on the wooden floor around the trapdoor to the pigsty. He’d swept what he could down the hatch and used a hard yard brush and hot soapy water to dilute the rest. He knew it wouldn’t completely remove the stain but he wasn’t worried about that. He could explain it away, insisting that it was animal blood from the time the harness broke and a pig got killed.

The animals in the pen below squealed as the water dropped down on them through the floorboards and Jacob Butts laughed. He wished the pigs could

He would speak, then he'd ask them how they enjoyed their feast last night. And he would tell them how well they were looking because of it. He'd go as far as to say they were displaying a new vigour, an extra glow to their appearance. Yes, they looked a lot healthier and much more attractive because of it.

He did wonder if he should have spread it out a bit, maybe just let them have one visitor at a time, or perhaps two. But in the mad moments following the visit a panic gripped him and he just wanted to get rid of them as fast as possible.

The whole affair had turned his mind into a blob of nothing. He never had to deal with that many before. The wave of terror that hit him had him rushing around in a frantic blur. Up and down the stairs to check that they were dead, back and forth across the room yelling at himself to calm down. His usual detached calmness had vanished like a wisp of fog in a sudden breeze.

Yet it was also the most amazing thrill, the explosion of adrenalin crashing through his body, the exhilaration that left him shaking and breathless. He hadn't experienced that sensation since the first time some people followed him home from the market. And got the surprise of their lives.

That day seemed so long ago now, and yet it was only just after Christmas. The first Fair Day of the New Year. The very first time Jacob Butts took the pigs to the market on his own.

He had been so excited he hadn't slept properly the night before. He knew the routine, of course. He'd been through it so many times with his father. Up early, hitch the cart to the pony, haul the pigs up through the hatch and coax them up the ramp into the pens on the cart. They usually arrived in Tralee Fair Field around nine o'clock and selected their spot just inside the gate.

But even though Jacob Butts was there beside his father, he was never actually involved. His father treated him like a hired hand. He could have been invisible. He was never introduced to anyone, never asked his opinion, never consulted about a strategy. The pigs got more attention than he did.

Still, Jacob watched and learnt. He took note of his father's performances, the body language of people as they approached, the indicators that showed if someone was interested in buying or just curious. The nods and the frowns, the way they danced around the question of price. He saw men quarrel for hours over a shilling then go to the pub and spend two shillings on ale to celebrate.

And he paid particular attention to his father's little nuances, the roll of the eyes, the sneer that said an offer was a joke, the casual way he played one buyer against the other. Because of his reputation for the quality of his animals, he didn't have to worry about a sale. He just loved the banter, the playing of the game. He was well respected, if not liked very much.

But that day when Jacob Butts first turned up on his own he noticed a considerable difference in the way people approached him. They circled him like hyenas sensing a quick and easy kill.

The first one up was Sean McGrath, a regular buyer. He started by saying how sorry he was to hear about Jacob's father. He was a great man, God rest his poor soul. Then McGrath examined the pigs and pulled a face, rubbing his hands on his coat as if he'd touched something rotten. He walked away then slid back moments later and asked how much Jacob wanted for the poor auld things, maybe he could take them off his hands as a favour.

Jacob felt intimidated by the aggressive McGrath. But he also sensed his father's presence at his shoulder rolling his eyes, and that intimidated him even more. Yes, he blushed and stuttered and gave a nervous swallow, but he made it clear that the price he was suggesting now was just the starting point. Like his father before him, he would listen to every bid, ignore most of them and make the final decision when he was good and ready.

McGrath puffed and snorted and made vague threats about Jacob having no choice but to sell to him, and he was irritated that the little pup didn't just roll over and accept his fate.

Other buyers tried the same approach but each time Jacob grew more confident and very soon a glimmer of respect started to show in the faces of the farmers around him. However, the pretence of being in total control began to take its toll on Jacob's nerves and by early afternoon his resolve started to unravel. So to everyone's surprise he accepted the next bid and headed downtown to the Grand Hotel for a meal. This was the part of the day he always looked forward to, sitting in the busy dining room listening to the banter and watching the farmers preening themselves like peacocks, exaggerating their profits and their value to society.

Jacob's father always took the table farthest from the door where he sat with his back to the wall so that he could observe the world around him.

Because he was on his own now Jacob was shown to the end of a long table that seated eighteen men. The banter was loud as men greeted each other and jeered their successes, or their failures. Chairs scraped on the bare floor as men got up or sat down, spilling beer and knocking items off the table. Used plates and empty dishes were stacked up all over the table and Jacob had to move some of them to clear himself space. He nodded to the men on either side of him and they nodded back, then they turned away and got lost in their conversations.

Jacob took the money from his inside pocket and lovingly counted it again, putting each note on the table until he made a healthy pile. He'd never had so much money in his life. It was a strange sensation just holding it in his hand. He wanted the whole world to know about it, that he was just as successful as his father had been. But the people around him didn't even notice. He folded it up again and put it back in his pocket.

As the waiter put a plate of bacon, cabbage and potatoes down in front of him, Jacob sensed a man standing just inside the door looking over at him. But as soon as Jacob looked up the man dropped his eyes and hurried back outside.

Jacob took a long drink of his beer as he tried to recall where he'd seen the man before. And when he re-appeared a few moments later Jacob remembered. He'd walked by Jacob's pitch in the Fair Field several times. There was another man too, although they were trying to give the impression they weren't together. But as Jacob was going back to where the pony was tied up on the corner of McCowen's Lane he noticed them again in a lively conversation with each other.

The man sat down at the table by the window and it didn't take Jacob long to spot the other one. He was almost hidden behind the door but with a clear view of Jacob. He too turned away when he saw Jacob looking at him. And an odd sensation put Jacob's senses on edge. Something was triggering an alarm in his sub consciousness, but he couldn't quite believe it. Surely these men were not a threat to him. They were probably just impressed by his performance today.

So he dismissed the thought, swallowed the rest of his beer and began to eat his dinner. He wasn't going to let anything spoil his first day at the market.

After another pint and a slab of cake, Jacob headed home. Because he was never a big drinker the beer and food had dulled his senses so he let the pony plod along at its own pace while he sat back in a comfortable haze. And when the cart hit a particularly bumpy bit of road he became painfully aware of his full bladder.

He must have dozed off because he couldn't remember the last few miles and now he was almost home. But he was far too uncomfortable to continue so he stopped the pony, jumped down and headed for the nearest bush.

And out of the corner of his eye, he spotted someone dart back around the bend in the road behind him. And the same sensation set his senses on edge again. Were those men from the hotel following him? The speed his pony was going they wouldn't have had any trouble keeping up with him.

He tried to put a calm perspective on this. It was probably totally innocent. But in his heart, he knew it was not and he had to swallow down the panic that was now pumping bile into his throat. Instinct was screaming at him to get home as quickly as possible and lock himself in the house. So he forgot about his bladder, jumped on the cart and slapped the pony into a gallop.

Back at the house he tied the pony out of sight behind some bushes and ran to the front door, unlocked it and crashed inside. His heart was racing so much it was diluting any oxygen that was going to his brain and he couldn't think straight. He locked the door, ran across the room and sat in his big chair by the fireplace. He could hear some very strange noises. Then he realized they were coming from him. He pleaded with himself to relax. He was safe now.

But when the bell on the bridge tinkled twice he threw himself out of the chair and grabbed the poker. How could he have forgotten about the bridge? He should have pulled up the bridge. Now they had clear access to the front door.

He had to get out. He ran to the stairs and threw himself down to the floor below just as the front door burst open. The two men charged in, spotted him immediately and leapt onto the stairs. In a wild panic, Jacob threw himself at the lever that folded the stairs back against the wall. The men tried to grab onto the rungs but it was too sudden and unexpected. They both dropped straight down the hatch into the pigsty. There was a horrible thud and they both lay still.

The rest was a blur, the screeching of the pigs, the thumping of his heart in his ears, the vomiting that he couldn't stop and which forced him to his knees in agony.

He spent the rest of the night curled up under the stairs, terrified that more men would come looking for the first two. What if they were part of a gang? What if their friends were already out looking for them?

In the morning he was horrified to see the mess the pigs had made of his visitors. There were bits all over the place, shoes, lumps of clothing, large bones but with no flesh left on them. He studied the pigs for any adverse signs but they seemed to be even more contented than ever.

He swept all the residue into the corner of the yard where his father had built a metal frame that he burnt rubbish in, and he shovelled the pile into it. Then he put some logs under it and lit them.

When the bonfire eventually died down Jacob dropped the side of the frame and let the ashes fall into the river. Some of the larger bones had to be broken up with a lump hammer, and the pieces were also swept away.

Chapter 15

Jacob Butts dreaded the next Fair Day. He didn't want to go back there in case his visitors had friends waiting for him. What if they started asking questions? Was he strong enough to face being asked about them? The thought of confrontation made him physically sick.

But he needed to sell his pigs. That was how the business worked. He had to sell his pigs to live.

So he prayed to the Lady for support. And to his great relief, everything at the market was perfectly normal. The buyers were much more receptive to him now. They accepted that he was new to this and they respected his attempts to continue where his father left off.

Later as he sat in the Grand Hotel having his pint and his bacon and cabbage, the world seemed good again. He checked his money several times, making no attempt to hide it. He had no reason to be concerned, and he went home in a relaxed stupor again.

It was already dark that evening when more visitors came. He was sitting in his armchair beside a nice log fire when the bell tinkled. Twice. There were two of them. Again? He cursed for not pulling up the bridge but he hadn't felt the need to. He didn't expect it to happen again. Not so soon.

Before he could get up they were already trying the door, rattling the handle and pushing it hard. Because he'd been so tired when he got home he hadn't replaced the hatch to the pigsty or re-set the stairs. So when the door burst open and the men threw themselves into the room they disappeared down the hole.

The feeling that coursed through Jacob Butts this time was pure anger. He was furious that they had the gall to try and take his hard-earned money off of him again. What gave them the right to just barge into someone's house and rob them? It wasn't right. He worked long and hard to get where he was, and they wanted to take it away from him? No, it was not right.

When he got down to the pigsty he started ripping the clothes off the men, even though one of them was still moaning. Jacob didn't care. These people didn't deserve to live. They had chosen their path and they had to accept the consequences.

He checked that they weren't wearing jewellery, rings or bracelets. He couldn't afford to let the pigs swallow anything that might upset them. What if something got stuck in their gullet and caused them distress?

As he piled the clothes on the bonfire he rummaged through the pockets. He found a letter written in a language he didn't recognize, a picture of a child, some holy medals, some coins, official papers with a strange stamp on them. They all went on the bonfire too.

In a big inside pocket, he found three watches, some gold chains, bangles and rings, two silver picture frames with a photograph of a girl. And a pile of coins wrapped in a piece of lint. These men had no compassion. They robbed everyone. They turned people's lives upside down. They were the dregs of society.

Something changed in Jacob Butts that day. As he prayed to the statue of the Virgin Mary he felt a new strength in his soul. Righteousness was on his side now. He had to cleanse society of a disease. This sickness had to be purged. People needed to be protected from this evil. And he had been chosen to do it.

One month later when he was standing in his usual place in the Fair Field he was suddenly aware that he had an amazing gift. He was able to spot a thief instantly just by the look in their eyes. He wouldn't even attempt to explain it. He just knew. It was the way they pretended they weren't looking at him, that they were just wandering by. But he read a message in the fleeting shadow that crossed their faces.

The two men that he noticed that day were so absorbed in their plans they didn't notice the sardonic smile on the lips of Jacob Butts. And in a heartbeat, the game began.

Jacob assumed the bearing of a naïve country boy, unwise to the dark ways of the big town. He flashed his money around and acted as if he was unaware of the consequences. But all the time he was enticing them, drawing them closer to his web.

His only worry was that they'd go on ahead and ambush him before he got to his house. So he kept them in his sight at all times. If he did lose them he would go home by a different road. There were so many lanes around that part of Kerry the robbers would have to be very lucky to guess the one he was going to take.

But they didn't. Like the others, they assumed it would be quick and easy. They were confusing his size with vulnerability.

The one thing Jacob detested was having to go down to the pigsty to strip the bodies in case the pigs swallowed something that might not agree with them. He thought about keeping the trapdoor closed but then the drop might not be enough to incapacitate them. So when he spotted a heavy metal contraption with long spikes that were used to rake the land, he had a brilliant idea. He positioned it over the hatch to the pigsty. Now when the visitors dropped through the rug they were impaled on it.

A few months later Jacob Butts realized he had a problem. No one followed him home. And he was irritated beyond belief. He had identified his man. Enticed him with the promise of easy pickings. But the man must have lost his nerve and turned back. And Jacob Butts felt as if he'd been denied a dose of some powerful drug. He'd been craving the moment for four long weeks and now a desperate wanting burnt through his insides and agitated him for days. He knew then he was addicted to the visits, to the thrill, to the executions. Which made him more determined to improve his technique. He was not going to be disappointed again.

Chapter 16

Eamon Foley threw his cap and jacket on the bed, loosened his tie and went across the hall to the kitchen. Vicky was standing by the range stirring something in a pot and the way her shoulders were hunched Foley sensed that she was upset. She glanced up at her brother and her eyes sparkled with tears.

‘What’s wrong, Vic?’

‘Nothing.’

Foley took a cup from the dresser and poured himself some tea, sipped it then took it over to the table. ‘There obviously is. So tell me. I might be able to help. I am a guard, you know.’

Vicky sucked in a sob and stirred the pot faster.

‘C’mon, Vic. Surely it can’t be that bad. Tell me. Please.’

Vicky threw down the spoon and wiped her hands on her apron. ‘My son is turning into a thief.’

‘Your son? What do you...?’

‘Joe.’ Vicky plonked herself on the chair opposite Foley. ‘I caught him in your room today.’

Foley watched his sister for a moment, unsure of how to respond. She wiped her eyes and continued before he could speak.

‘He was poking through your stuff. He was up to no good. He fell off the chair when he heard me coming in the door.’ Now the tears were coming freely. ‘I’m so sorry, Eamon. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I only went over to the butcher to get you something for your tea. I was only gone half an hour. Maybe not even that. I left him looking after the others. I thought I could trust him. He’s a big boy now. He’s not a child anymore. But when I got back I heard him in your room. He was up on a chair searching the top of your wardrobe.’

‘What was he looking for? There’s nothing in my room that’s worth stealing, I can assure you of that. I haven’t got any money if that was what he was looking for.’

‘I couldn’t get any sense out of him. He was obviously looking for something to steal but he pretended he was looking for comics. He said you had a load of comics and you said he could borrow them. But it was all a pack of lies. I’m afraid it’s come to this. Joe has become as big an outlaw as his father. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Eamon. I tried rearing him properly. You know that. But ...’

‘Hey, hey, hey,’ Foley took out his handkerchief and handed it to her. ‘There’s no need for all this. Don’t be upsetting yourself, Vicky. I’m sure it’s just an isolated incident. Do you want me to have a word with him? Where is he now? Upstairs?’

‘No,’ Vicky twisted the handkerchief in her hands. ‘He stormed out. He was so angry when I tried to question him. He just stood there and lied to my face. I felt so helpless. I couldn’t hold him back.’

‘Don’t worry. He’ll be back when he’s hungry.’

‘I don’t know about that. He was all purple in the face when he ran out. He was desperate to catch up with the girl.’

‘What girl?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t get a proper look at her. I was in your room trying to get Joe to tell me what he was up to when I heard someone run out the front door. I ran out after her but she was too far away by then, almost down by the market gates.’

‘So you don’t know who she was? You didn’t recognize her at all?’

‘All I know is it was a girl. She was small. She had black hair tied up in a ponytail.’

‘What did Joe say about her? Did he look like he knew her?’

‘Oh, he knew her all right. He shoved me out of the way in his rush to catch up with her. He was almost crying. His voice was breaking as he shouted after her. Alex, wait, he shouted. Alex, wait for me.’

A cold shock rippled through Foley and he knew he gulped. ‘Alex? He called her Alex? As in Alex Cassidy who used to live here?’

‘That’s what he called her.’

‘But how...?’ Foley wanted to say how could it be Alex? Alex was dead. Liam Edge insisted she’d gone back home to Galway. But Foley knew differently. The body Joe found in the graveyard was definitely Alex Cassidy. It was impossible to identify her because of her injuries so she was written off as a drunken, homeless person with mental health problems. No one questioned it. Except for Eamon Foley. But he had no evidence and that was the end of it. ‘Why would Joe think it was... that was years ago, so why would he... Good God, what’s going on?’

Vicky wiped her nose and put the handkerchief in the pocket of her apron. ‘I wish to God I knew, Eamon. Ever since his father was killed I haven’t been able to get to him. It’s as if I lost him too. He became a different person. He was a little boy one day and the next he was an angry young man. Sometimes I think he blames it all on me. He thinks it was all my fault. I pray to the Sacred Heart every night to show me what to do, show me a way to get my little boy back.’

Foley pulled out a cigarette, went across to the range and lifted the hot plate. He picked up a lump of coal with the tongs and lit the cigarette, then dropped the coal back into the fire. He replaced the hot plate and took a long drag on the cigarette. Blowing smoke down his nose he went back to the table and handed the packet to Vicky. She brushed it away.

‘I suppose it’s understandable.’ Foley sucked on the cigarette again. ‘After what the poor lad went through. Not only did he lose his father but he found the body of a young woman half-buried in his father’s grave. I mean, that’s enough to drive anyone insane. He must have had some ferocious nightmares after that. The poor boy thought it was his father trying to dig his way out of his...’

Vicky gasped and jumped up, but when she tried to speak all that came out was a sob. Foley jumped up too and wrapped his arms around her.

‘I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. I’m sorry. Sit down. I’ll get you some tea. I’m sorry, I was...’

‘It’s all right, Eamon.’ Vicky dropped back down on the chair. ‘I know what you’re saying. And you’re right. It must have affected him. He hasn’t been the same since.’

As Foley handed her the cup of tea he tried to shake off the image of that day in the graveyard.

‘The thing is,’ Vicky said after she took a long swig of the tea, ‘he never spoke about what happened that day, finding a body like that. All we knew was what you told us. Joe never mentioned it. Not a word. He was upset that it wasn’t his Da coming back. But after that, he never mentioned it again. I was waiting for him to bring it up, to tell me how he felt. But he never did. Not once. Not a word. It

bothered me for ages. I wanted to discuss it with him but I just didn't know how to. Maybe I was frightened about how he would react, that I might say the wrong thing and upset him even more. But it was as if he had wiped it all out of his mind like you'd wipe the chalk off a blackboard.'

'Mammy,' Vicky's daughter appeared in the doorway, her little hand holding out a letter. 'This was on the floor when I came in from school. I was minding it for you.'

'Oh. Thank you, Kathryn.' Vicky held out her hand and the child brought it over to her, taking short shy steps. Then she looked at her mother with wide anxious eyes.

'I was going to bring it down to you but I heard you shouting at Joe so I...'

'I wasn't shouting at Joe,' Vicky said in a sharp tone, then she tried to soften it a bit. 'I was... we were just discussing something, that's all. I'm sorry if you thought I was shouting. It only sounded like I was shouting, that's all.'

'I thought you were shouting at him because of the lady.'

Vicky was studying the address on the envelope and it was a second before she looked up. 'What lady?'

'The lady that was in your room. She said hello to me and she asked me if I remembered her. She said she used to live here and that she left something behind when she moved out. She said her friend Michael lived in your room and she might have left it there by mistake. But when she heard you and Joe shouting she ran down the stairs.'

Vicky's eyes flashed. 'She was in my room? What was she doing in my room, the cheeky cow?'

Kathryn stepped back away from her mother and her lip quivered. 'I don't know, Mammy. All I did was look at her and she smiled at me. I didn't ...'

'All right, darling.' Vicky put out her arms and drew the child into a tight hug. 'It's not your fault. Don't be upsetting yourself about it now. It was nothing to do with you. So run off and play, there's a good girl.'

'What's for tea?'

Vicky glanced at the pot on the stove. 'It's almost ready. I'll call you when it is. So go on. Go and play.'

As the child scooted away Vicky ripped open the envelope. 'If it was Alex, why did she run away like that?' she asked absently as she pulled out the letter and unfolded it. 'Why didn't she just wait for me to come home and tell me what she was looking for?'

'That was not Alex. It couldn't be. Alex is... gone back home. Like you said, if it... well, it couldn't be Alex, and that's for sure.'

Vicky put up her hand to silence him and she tapped the letter. 'It's from Mammy. Liam is coming to Tralee for some court case and she was wondering if it was all right for him to stay here.'

Foley heard himself groan. This was not good news. The timing couldn't have been worse. Someone pretending to be Alex Cassidy sneaking around at the same time as Liam Edge was back in town? It could only end in tears.

Chapter 17

The Superintendent was like a fly on the inside of a window, agitated and desperate to be somewhere else. As Foley waited out in the corridor he could hear the name of the Garda Commissioner being spat out along with a string of others, including legal personnel. When Sgt Fitzgerald called him in Foley stood to attention in front of the huge desk.

'What in God's name possessed you to take Mr Daly and his whole bloody family over to the morgue and go crashing in there like some sort of Stormtrooper? You were supposed to be discreet. And sympathetic. You might as well have gone at this with a bloody sledgehammer.'

Superintendent Cornelius Carey was a tall man with a long face and a Roman nose. He looked like a bird of prey studying his victim with his dark unblinking eyes. His Adan's apple popped in and out of his shirt collar, and his lips were purple with rage.

'I tried to, Sir.' Foley avoided looking directly into the staring eyes. 'But they wouldn't listen to me. They were out of control, roaring and screaming and threatening all sorts of stuff.'

Sgt Fitzgerald gave him a poke in the back and Foley remembered the advice he was given. The Super has more important things to worry about and he'll be as anxious to get this over with as you are. So don't answer back. Be contrite. Apologize. Let the Super rant on and accept what he throws at you. The less you say the sooner you'll be dismissed. Then thank him and go.

So Foley stood up straight again and gave a sharp bow of his head. 'I'm very sorry, Sir. I wasn't thinking.'

'No, you bloody well were not. You didn't consider the trouble your actions would cause going out there and putting your two big feet right in it. I find it even harder to believe you took them over to the morgue and just barged in. It beggars belief. How long do you think it'll take me to calm the Dalys down after that? I'm at a loss as to how I'm going to stop him from taking this all the way up to Dublin. It's a right feckin mess and that's no lie. I'm at a loss as to what I should do with you, Foley. My instinct is to kick your arse right out of the force. But lucky for you, we're desperately short of officers right now. So I'm handing you over to Sergeant Fitzgerald who will find a suitable punishment for you. But be assured, Foley, this is your last chance. Do anything remotely like this again and you will be out on your ear. Do I make myself clear?'

Foley gave another contrite nod. 'Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.'

The Super swatted him away and turned his attention to the papers on his desk. Sgt Fitzgerald barked an order and he and Foley marched out of the room.

Out in the corridor, the sergeant steered Foley into the canteen, ordered two teas and strode across to the table in the far corner where he pulled out a chair. As he sat down he motioned for Foley to sit opposite.

'I don't know what to make of you, Foley. Part of me thinks you're only in the job because of your step-father, the legendary Inspector Liam Edge who stopped an armed robbery single-handed. The moment something better comes along you'll be away like a snake into the long grass.' He paused for effect but didn't wait for a

response. 'Another part of me thinks you're an arrogant little shit who thinks the rules don't apply to him. I can't decide if you're very clever and hide it well, or if you are the big feckin eejit everyone thinks you are.'

The teas arrived and he pushed one towards Foley.

'The thing is, Foley, I'm confused. On the one hand, I think you should be given a good wallop for your cavalier approach to the job. But on the other hand, I have to admire your initiative. You took the scant bit of evidence you had and followed your instincts. Unfortunately, you ended up with shit all over your shoes but that was just bad luck. And we still don't know who the dead fella is. Or what happened to Paudy Daly.'

He took a long sip of his tea. 'Anyway, it's a job for the detectives now so you don't have to worry about it anymore. In the meantime, just keep your head down and do what you're told. Get back out there on the mean streets of Tralee while I think of a despicable punishment for you.'

A young guard appeared behind them. 'Eamon, there's a fella at the desk asking for you. He won't say what it's about, just that if you aren't too busy could you spare him a minute.'

Sgt Fitzgerald shrugged and picked up his cap. 'Make it quick, then get back out there. I'll talk to you later.'

Stefan Zedenski gave a nervous smile as Foley came down the stairs into the reception area and he rolled his cap in his hands.

'I'm very sorry to bother you.' He took Foley's outstretched hand and shook it. 'I hope I haven't taken you away from something important.'

'Not at all.' Foley steered him to the bench by the wall. 'It's nice to see you again. How're you doing?'

'Good,' Stefan nodded as he lowered himself onto the bench. 'And you? Are you good too?'

'Well, as they say around here, I'm fair to middling,' Foley laughed. 'So what brings you down here?'

'I was hoping you can give me some advice.'

'Certainly, if I can. What would you like to know?'

Stefan swallowed nervously. 'It sounds a bit silly when I say it, but one of our crewmen has not come back to the ship. I am not sure what to do about it. Should I report it to you or should I maybe wait a bit more and see if he returns later?'

'Well, that depends on how long he's been missing. The fact is most people turn up after a day or two full of guilt and carrying a load of excuses.'

Stefan nodded. 'I understand. He went ashore two nights ago and no one has seen him since. But when I heard you tell Vicky yesterday that you found a body near Blennerville I had a very bad feeling. Then you said you already knew who the person was so I didn't say anything. However, now that he still hasn't come back I have the bad feeling again.'

'Oh, I see. But why would you be concerned about what happened near Blennerville? Your ship is out in Fenit, isn't it?'

'It is. But sometimes when the canal is too busy or the tide is not right we have to tie up in Blennerville and wait in line. So if we're there overnight the lads often go ashore there.'

'And your crewman... what's his name?'

‘Viktor Marks. Viktor is our cook.’

‘So Viktor went ashore in Blennerville with the others?’

Stefan rolled his cap faster. ‘No, not with the others. He went later. After dinner, when he had cleaned up the galley.’

‘Oh, so he met up with the others afterwards, right?’

‘No. The thing is, Eamon... may I call you Eamon when you’re on duty?’

‘Of course, you can,’ Foley smiled. ‘Eamon is grand.’

‘Thank you. What I was going to say is that Viktor is a lovely young man. But he is also a very... how do you say... private? He is a very private person. Everyone likes him, I have to tell you. Mainly because he is the cook and he cooks what we like so naturally we like him. He is always in a good mood. He’s polite to everyone as well. However...’ Stefan leant his head back against the wall as he struggled to find the right words, ‘...he does not always join in with what the other lads want to do. Sometimes they are too rough for him, too noisy. Especially when they drink too much. So when he goes ashore it is mostly on his own. He will often just go for a walk, walk into town and look in the shops.’

Foley took out his notebook and flipped open a new page. ‘So you’re saying he went ashore on his own two nights ago and no one has seen him since. Has he ever...’

Stefan anticipated the question. ‘No, Eamon. Viktor had not ever been late like this before. In all of the years, I have known him he has been late maybe two times and that was only by a couple of hours. He has never been gone for this long before.’

‘So just to get this clear in my head, you’re sure he went ashore in Blennerville?’

‘Yes. He spoke to the watchman as he walked down the gangway. But when he was not back the next morning some of the lads went looking for him. As you can imagine, when they heard a body had been found they were very upset. But when I told them you knew who the person was they were so relieved. But he still hasn’t come back today and now we are all very worried.’

Now it was Foley’s turn to get a bad feeling. ‘Stefan, can I ask you what Viktor looks like? How old is he?’

‘He was twenty in July. He is about five feet ten tall, with black hair. I don’t know what he was wearing, probably his suit. He always wore his suit.’

Foley realized he still had the ring in his pocket. ‘Do you know if Viktor had anything on him that we might use to identify him? You know, something like a watch, or maybe a ring? Anything like that?’

Stefan’s eyes narrowed as they watched Foley. ‘He was wearing a ring.’

‘A ring? You’re sure?’

‘I am. It was new. There was a lot of... how do you say...taking the mickey about it when he came back one evening wearing it. He said a friend gave it to him. But then he said he found it in the street. But no one believed him and they teased him all day.’

‘Can you describe it?’

Stefan nodded again. His face had taken on a paler sheen. ‘I think so. It was silver, with some kind of writing on it.’

‘Was it anything like this?’

Foley took out the ring and handed it to Stefan, and his face crumbled. 'Yes. It was like this. Where did you get it?'

Foley began writing in his notebook as he searched for the right way to break the bad news. 'I hate to tell you this, Stefan, but we were wrong about the body we found near Blennerville. It wasn't who we thought it was. We identified this ring all right. But it wasn't the right person wearing it.'

Stefan closed his hand over the ring and held it to his mouth. 'So I was right to have bad feelings about it?'

'I'm afraid you might be.' Foley patted him on the arm. 'But there's only one way to find out for sure. I know it's a horrible thing to ask of you, but would you be prepared to come over to the hospital to look at the body? That way we can say if it's Viktor or not.'

Stefan nodded and handed the ring back. Foley dropped it back into his pocket.

'Thank you, Stefan. Can I ask you to wait here for a moment while I phone the hospital to arrange a time for us to call over there?'

Chapter 18

Inspector Liam Edge was already on his feet as the train pulled into Tralee station, anxiously scanning the people on the platform. He was hoping he wouldn't see any familiar faces amongst them. He just wanted to slip back into town without being noticed.

He wasn't in uniform now so taken out of context he'd be just another face in the crowd. But he'd been a familiar sight around the town back when this was his beat so there was a possibility someone from those days could still recognize him and try to engage him in conversation.

He picked up his suitcase and pushed the door open as the train shuddered to a stop, and he kept his head down as he stepped onto the platform and headed for the exit.

As he walked through the gate into Edward Street he couldn't avoid looking up at the impressive Slieve Mish Mountains that took up most of the skyline and created a spectacular backdrop to St John's Church and its imposing steeple. He was still amazed at how beautiful it was. It was the first thing you noticed when you approached Tralee and he always got that lovely glow inside him when it came into view.

Seeing it now reminded him of how he used to love this town. He'd spent his whole life here. He knew every street and alleyway. And most of the people. The very fabric of his being was soaked with the smells and the noise of the town. He always thought he'd spend the rest of his life here, retire here, see out his final days here.

But he threw it all away in one moment of total madness. Now all that was left was a heavy sorrow. His whole world had changed at that moment. All the colour bled out of his life and left him in a grey and hopeless void.

And all because of Alice.

Meeting Alice Shea was the single, most wonderful thing that ever happened to Liam Edge in his whole life.

He was ashamed to admit it but when his first wife Eileen Burke died all he was concerned about was whether he would lose his job. He was a policeman, and Eileen Burke was on the opposite side of the fence, an active member of the IRA. She was killed when the Free State Troopers marched on Tralee during the civil war in 1922. They questioned his loyalty, of course, but his record and his medal from bravery convinced them what side he was on.

Alice Shea came up to shake his hand after the funeral, and nothing was ever the same again.

'So sorry for your loss.' Her voice was husky and her handshake was soft. And her dark eyes were so intense that Edge was startled for a moment, mesmerized by the way she held his hand and let her black hair sweep around her shoulders.

Two happy years was all they had together. Then Alice was gone, drowned while swimming in the sea on a beautiful summer's day.

It took a long time but eventually, Liam Edge managed to conceal the pain, keep it out of sight of those who thought he should just file it away and move on. But she was always there, every day, in everything he did, in everything he saw.

When he married the gentle widow Kathryn Foley he knew Alice approved because the pain lessened and his life floated along on a more even keel.

Until the day Kathryn's son Eamon came home with a little boy and a strange girl called Alex Cassidy. The moment he saw her Liam Edge felt as if his heart was chopped into little pieces with a butcher's knife. The physical resemblance was incredible. Similar height, similar build, similar hair as black as a raven's wing, similar dark eyes. At first glance, they could have been sisters, twins even.

But that was where the comparison ended. Alice Shea fizzed with infectious energy. Her eyes sparkled with impish amusement.

Alex Cassidy, on the other hand, had a strangeness about her that Liam Edge couldn't quite grasp. She had energy too but it was unfocused, giving the impression that she was either very clever or a bit simple. And Liam Edge knew he should have kept his distance from her. He'd seen too many people get sucked into situations like that when their emotions overruled their senses. They believed they could control it. Then before they knew it they'd wandered into quicksand and were suddenly way out of their depth.

But every time Liam Edge saw Cassidy his heart ached for Alice Shea. Alice had left a huge emptiness in his life. Alex Cassidy wasn't perfect, but just by being there, she was keeping the memory of Alice alive.

Liam Edge never deliberately tried to hurt her. But in a moment of blind anger, he crossed the line. Getting promoted to Inspector and moving to Limerick was supposed to draw a line under it. But not a day went by when he didn't have nightmares about it.

And it took its toll on him. He was so, so weary now. He hated his job. He hated being an Inspector. He was a beat cop. He loved walking the streets. He detested being cooped up in an office shuffling papers from one tray to another, trying to juggle data to match some meaningless directives. He hated Limerick, the cold impersonal streets and the even colder Garda station. He hated his boss and most of his colleagues. And they had no time for him, the hero from the sticks.

He was desperate to call it a day, take his pension and retire. It would be a huge drop in his income, of course. And he couldn't come back to Tralee. But if he sold his house in Limerick and his house in Rock Street, they could afford to move somewhere near the coast and live comfortably.

Which was the real reason he was coming to Tralee now. He wasn't needed for the trial of the Driscoll brothers. It was a clear case of assault. His evidence was minor. But it was a good excuse to visit Vicky and Eamon.

He would have to pick the moment very carefully because it was not going to be a comfortable conversation. When he sold the house in Rock Street, Vicky and her five children, and Foley and his boy Mickey, would have to find somewhere else to live.

As Liam Edge crossed Edward Street the smell of hops from Latchfords was heavy in the air, and he pretended that was the reason his eyes were wet. He wiped them with an angry swipe and headed across town.

Chapter 19

The moment they came back out through the front door of St Catherine's Hospital, Foley lit a cigarette and sucked the smoke in deep. He was desperate to dislodge the bitter smell of chemicals and death that was still lingering in his nostrils. He held the packet out to Stefan but he waved it away.

Stefan's face was a pasty grey and his eyes were red and watery. He stood with his head bowed and his hands behind his back.

'Thank you,' Foley said through a cloud of smoke. 'That wasn't an easy thing to do.'

Stefan's eyes flashed and an angry ripple danced across them. 'I do not understand, Eamon. Why would someone do that? Who would do that to such a lovely person as Viktor?'

'Stefan, if we knew why we'd probably find who.' Foley spat out a bit of tobacco and wiped his lip. 'The fact is most murders are committed by someone who's known to the victim. Studies conducted by Scotland Yard say that murder is rarely a random attack by a stranger. That's why we begin every investigation by talking to the family. And the people closest to the victim. In this case, it would be the lads he worked with. The crew of your ship.'

Stefan glanced up quickly. 'Are you saying someone on our ship did this?'

Foley started walking back to town and he nodded for Stefan to follow. 'Of course not. But as I said, we always look at the family... or the...'

'No, Eamon. I would bet my life that no one on the ship would do that. We were all very fond of Viktor. We have been on this ship for a long time. We are like a family. We are closer than a family. None of them... none of us would wish to harm any one of our crew. No, I cannot believe anyone on our ship would do something like that.'

They walked on in silence for a while as Foley picked at the questions that were scrambling to get out. He needed to put them in some sort of order. 'So tell me more about Viktor,' was the first one he asked.

Stefan pondered the question and looked up at the sky 'He was very young, maybe twelve years old when his parents got flu and died. His uncle was a cousin of our captain so he took him on as a cabin boy. Otherwise, he would be sent to an orphanage. Sadly his uncle got flu very soon afterwards and also died. Then as time went on Viktor helped in the galley, and finally became the ship's cook.'

'And he's been living on your ship ever since?'

'Yes. As have I. And most of the crew.'

'You said a friend gave him the ring. Do you know this friend?'

'I do not, I'm sorry. He never spoke about a friend. The first time he ever mentioned a friend was when we asked him about the beautiful ring he was wearing when he came back on board one evening. But he got embarrassed by the way he was teased and he said he found it in the street.'

'Oh? When you say he was teased...?'

'Eamon, you must realize that sailors are very sensitive about what people think of them. For as long as men have been going to sea in boats they have been accused of having unnatural relationships with other men. So to prove those people wrong, when sailors go ashore they spend time with as many women as they can afford. You have heard the saying? If it is female and has a pulse, a sailor will sleep with it?'

Foley glanced up at the big Pole. 'I don't understand. Why was Viktor teased if he was like that, taking advantage of the females?'

'Actually, that is the problem, Eamon. All the time Viktor has been with us no one ever saw him with a girl. So obviously we wondered if maybe he didn't like girls. We teased him about it. But not in a bad way, you understand? We loved him like a brother so we would never be cruel to him about that.'

Some people walking by looked at Foley then at Stefan, and then back at Foley. Foley smiled and nodded at them. They nodded back but still looked curious.

'Sometimes if someone was in a bad mood or maybe annoyed about something they would comment. Old Zac, especially. He would say if God wanted men to be together like that he would have created Adam and Bruce.'

Foley laughed out loud but quickly checked himself. 'So who's Old Zac?'

'He is the oldest crewman on the ship. No one knows how old he is but he must be eighty years old already. He prays a lot. And if you are on board at six o'clock you have to kneel and say the Rosary with him. No one is excused, not even the captain. And he always preaches about the sins of the flesh, even to the women he pays to sleep with him.'

He glanced at Foley for effect. Foley nodded.

'But he is harmless. He is kind and we all love him like a father. Or an elderly uncle.'

'So are you saying Old Zac thinks Viktor and this friend who gave him the ring are close?'

'No. I don't know. Maybe. But even if he did, he did not say.'

'He wasn't angry? Annoyed maybe?'

'No, no. He was not angry with Viktor. There was no bad feeling between them. It's just that all the crew are Catholic. And as you know, we were brought up to believe that men like that are living in mortal sin.'

Stefan stopped dead and Foley almost collided with him. 'Eamon, I promise you there is not a single person on our ship who would wish Viktor any harm. Anything they said to him about his private life was always in fun. Just banter, as you say in Ireland.'

As they reached Bridge Street Foley started to cut across to the Garda barracks but Stefan stopped at the corner.

'Aren't you going back to your ship?'

Stefan blushed and gave a nervous grin. 'I think I would like to call on Vicky first. I hope you don't mind.'

'Of course not.' Foley held out his hand. 'Thank you for all your help today.'

'You're welcome.' Stefan gave the hand a firm shake. 'So what happens now, Eamon? Is there anything else I can do to help you?'

Foley took off his cap and scratched his head. 'Actually, I would like to come on board your ship and talk to the crew. Maybe take a look at Viktor's stuff to see if we can identify his friend.'

'I can take you.'

'No. That is what I would like to do. But unfortunately, I'm only a guard. Now that we know who Viktor is all I can do is write up my report and pass it on to the detectives.'

Stefan looked angry and annoyed at the same time. 'You will not be investigating this anymore?'

'I'm sorry, Stefan.'

Stefan's lip curled as he turned away and started walking towards Rock Street.

'Listen,' Foley called after him. 'You could do me a huge favour, though. Find out who his friend is. I would like to know where he got the ring.'

Stefan turned back. 'Eamon, the ship is just over there in the basin. We could go over there and talk to the crew right now and you could be back on duty in ten minutes.'

Foley glanced towards the docks. 'I don't know. I'm supposed to give this to the detectives.'

Then the voice of Sgt Fitzgerald popped into his head. 'You're a maverick, Foley. Always doing your own thing.'

'Ah well. What have I got to lose?' He grinned at Stefan and nodded towards the basin. 'Lead on.'

Chapter 20

Foley was surprised at how small and cramped the crew's quarters were, considering the size of the ship. Four bunk beds lined the bulkhead on either side of a narrow gangway. The top bunk was folded up and the bottom one was used as a seat. Between each bunk, there was a small metal locker and a curtained off area for hanging clothes. Down the middle of the space was a long table with wooden seats on either side.

The crew sat around the table in shocked silence as Stefan spoke to them in Polish. Foley studied the faces and all he saw was grief. A couple of men took out

handkerchiefs and blew their noses. Others just looked into the distance, the news of the tragedy causing deep creases in their faces.

The captain was a small round man with a big pink face and tight curly hair, and he locked his hands in front of him. When Stefan finished speaking the crew all looked at the Captain but he could only shake his head. He was too choked up to say anything.

Stefan turned to Foley and waited for him to ask his questions, but for a moment Foley was caught up in the emotion and couldn't remember what he was going to say. He took out his notebook to check again.

'Is this everyone? Is this the whole crew?' He desperately wanted something to drink but this wasn't the time to ask for a cup of tea.

'Yes,' Stefan answered. 'Nine. Sorry, eight. There is eight of us now.'

'Well, the obvious question is did anyone see Viktor on the night he died? I understand some of you were ashore in Blennerville. Did any of you see him there?'

They all shook their head when Stefan translated.

'Look, I know it's very upsetting for you all but if we're ever going to find out what happened to Viktor we need to know what he was doing that evening. Did he meet someone? Did you notice anything unusual in his manner before he went ashore? It might have seemed trivial or silly at the time, but it might be important now.'

Again the response was a shake of the head and a shrug.

'The thing is Viktor is dead now so anything you say can't hurt him. And while we're searching for answers the killer is still walking around out there. We need to catch him and make him pay for what he did.'

The captain said something to Stefan, stood up and went back up the ladder to the upper deck. Two of the crew followed him but the others just watched, unsure of what to do next.

'The captain is too upset right now,' Stefan said. 'He said if he does hear anything he will come and speak to you personally. But now there is a lot of work to do. We have cargo to load and a schedule to keep if we want to get through the lock gates tonight. He wishes you well.'

'What about the mysterious friend who gave Viktor the ring?'

Stefan spoke to the crew again and an elderly man on his right looked up at Foley.

'Viktor was a very private person, Officer,' he said in perfect English. 'He rarely spoke about things like that. You know, friends and stuff? He was friends with everyone, but I don't think he was close with anyone in particular. Except for maybe that lad who delivers the meat from the butcher. I've seen them sharing a cigarette and a joke a few times when he comes on board.'

'This is Zac,' Stefan interrupted. 'He is our longest serving crewman. He is also the wisest.'

Zac gave a toothless smile and a quick wave. 'Pleased to meet you, officer.'

'Likewise,' Foley nodded back. 'So tell me about this butcher's boy.'

Zac shrugged. 'They're about the same age. And he is the only one who seems to have time for a cigarette and a cup of tea. But please don't think I'm saying he was

the one who gave Viktor the ring. I don't know. All I'm saying is he's the only one I've seen Viktor being pally with.'

A tall, thin man sat up straight and said something, and Zac nodded.

'Eric just asked if the delivery boy has red hair and I said yes,' Stefan said to Foley. 'And Eric said he remembered seeing Viktor with a red-haired lad walking around the town park together.'

'When was this?'

Stefan asked the man and nodded at the answer. 'One-day last week. He thinks it was Friday.'

'So where does this lad work, do you know?'

Stefan went into the tiny gallery behind him and came back with a spike that had a pile of receipts stuck on it. He flicked through them then pulled one-off. 'Jackie Maher, High Street.'

'And what's the boy's name?'

Stefan asked Eric but he didn't know. Foley finished writing in his notebook, flicked it shut and put it back in his pocket.

'Thank you, gentlemen. Please accept my sincere condolences for the loss of your friend.' He patted Stefan on the arm and put his cap back on. 'I'm sorry for your loss, Stefan. And thank you again for your help today.'

Stefan nodded but didn't answer, and Foley headed for the stairs.

Chapter 21

Liam Edge was sitting at the table when Foley walked into the kitchen and for a moment Foley didn't recognize his step-father. He'd never seen a man change so much in just three years. The imposing six foot four Garda Inspector appeared to have shrivelled. His shoulders sagged as he slumped forward in the chair and the weary eyes that looked back at Foley were sunk into dark sockets. His hair had thinned so much his pink scalp was visible through it, and the hands that were wrapped around a mug of tea were thin and mottled.

'Liam,' Foley put out his hand. 'How are you?'

Edge half rose and took Foley's hand. 'I'm grand, Eamon. And how's yourself these days?'

'I'm good.' Foley glanced over at Vicky who was standing with her back against the sink. 'Would there be any tea in the pot?'

Vicky jumped up, grabbed a mug from the draining board and took it to the range. 'You're home early.' She had relief in her voice, glad of the distraction as she poured the tea. 'I hope you're not skiving again, Eamon Foley. You know your sergeant always finds out if you sneak home when you're supposed to be on duty? He'll be after you again.'

'Not at all,' Foley chuckled. 'I'm just on my way to see a man about something and I thought I'd drop in to see how things were with you. Seeing as I didn't get to see you this morning before I went out.'

He took the mug over to the table and sat opposite Edge. 'So what time did Joe come home yesterday?'

Vicky straightened up and shook her head at him, indicating with her eyes that she didn't want Liam Edge to know about this. But the inspector was preoccupied anyway and didn't seem to notice.

'So,' Foley addresses his step-father, 'Ma didn't come with you?'

Edge blinked rapidly and sipped at his tea. 'No. It was a bit short notice. And no one knows how long I'll be needed here. As soon as I've given my evidence I'll be expected back at my desk.'

'She was disappointed, though?' Vicky put her cup in the sink with a loud clink.

'Yes, she was. Very disappointed.'

'Still, I thought she would have taken this... unexpected... opportunity to come with you. You know it's almost three years already? That's an awfully long time to go without seeing your children. I expected ...' Vicky's voice cracked and she covered her mouth with her hand.

Edge put his hand out towards her then dropped it in his lap. 'I know, I know. But you have to remember this town has some horrible memories for her. She went through hell after losing Mary like that. There's not a day that goes by when she doesn't blame herself, wishing she'd done more to help her. I know she misses you too, and all the grandchildren. But she's not ready yet. So ... maybe soon. With God's help.'

Foley took a long drink from his mug of tea as Edge pulled out a packet of cigarettes and offered him one. He took it and waited for Edge to crack a match and light it for him.

'So what are you up to today, Eamon?' Edge asked as he lit his cigarette. 'Do I know this fella you're going to see?'

'Yeah, probably. Jackie Maher, the butcher.'

'Yes, I remember Jackie Maher, over there in High Street. So what's he done to warrant your attention? Don't say he's butchered some poor eejit in cold blood and is selling his bits at an extortionate price?'

Foley forced a laugh and sucked hard at the cigarette again. 'Nothing as exciting as that, I'm afraid. Just a routine enquiry. Boring and time-consuming, as you'll know only too well.' He was struggling to pretend this was a normal conversation and he knew Edge was uncomfortable too. When Foley looked over at Vicky she was staring back with big eyes that were trying to understand the strange atmosphere that radiated from her brother and her step-father. Foley wished he could tell her.

The front door opened and Foley's son Mickey came into the kitchen holding a note that he took straight over to Vicky. He did a double-take when he noticed Liam Edge, and when Edge smiled back at him he moved closer to his father.

'Say hello to Grandad,' Vicky said as she took the note and unfolded it. 'I told you he was coming to visit us, didn't I?'

Mickey looked unsure but when Edge gave a small wave he seemed to relax. He walked over and cautiously held out his hand. 'Hello, Grandad.'

'Hello, Mickey. How are you?'

'I was called into the headmaster's office today.'

'Oh? Why was that?'

'He wanted to know why Joe wasn't in school again today.'

Edge looked at Vicky who was studying the note with a frustrated glare on her face. Mickey sensed he was speaking out of turn and he moved back towards his father. 'He said Joe hasn't been at school all this week either.'

Vicky squeezed her eyes shut and waved the note in agitation. 'So where was he, Mickey? Do you know?'

'I do not. The last time I saw him was at breakfast.'

'But didn't you walk to school with him? Didn't you see him go in?'

'No. I met my pals and we went in together. I didn't see where Joe went. And I didn't see him in the yard at playtime either.'

'Alright,' Foley shooed him away. 'Go and change out of your school clothes.'

Mickey didn't have to be told twice. As he hurried towards the door he grinned back at Liam Edge. 'I think he might be with his girlfriend, you know.'

'What?' Vicky yelped and practically ran at him. 'What girlfriend?'

'The one that was here yesterday. You know? The one you saw in the hallway.'

'But she's... what makes you think... but she's a grown woman. She's not a schoolgirl. I hope to God she's not saying she's his girlfriend.'

The front door opened and Joe dashed in, hoping to make the stairs without being seen. But Mickey coming out of the kitchen followed by Vicky stopped him in his tracks.

'Joe.' Vicky's wagged the piece of paper at him. 'Where the hell have you been all day?'

Joe glared at her under his eyes. 'At school. Where do you think I was?'

'Don't you lie to me, Joe McCarthy. I have a note from your teacher asking where you were for the past few days.'

'I was at school. Of course, I was at school. Where do you think...?'

Mickey slinked past them and scrambled into his room, barely glancing back.

'Get in here,' Vicky pointed to the kitchen. 'I want to talk to you right now.'

'Fleck off. I'm only after coming in from school and I want to go up to my room and...'

'What did you just say to your mother?' The sight of Foley suddenly appearing behind Vicky stunned the boy into silence. His face drained and he stepped back away from them. But his eyes darkened again in less than a heartbeat and he jutted out his jaw.

'I didn't say anything,' he spat. 'She's saying I wasn't at school and I was so I don't know why she telling a big lie like that.'

'Get in the kitchen,' Vicky yelled, stepping back and waving him in with a sweep of her hand. 'Now!'

Reluctantly the boy slid past her, and he was even more surprised to see Liam Edge looking back at him.

'Grandad,' he gasped.

Edge nodded and gave a broad smile. 'My gosh, but haven't you grown up since I saw you last?'

Joe sensed an ally and ran over to Edge with his arms open wide. 'Grandad, I missed you.'

Edge let him fold his arms around his neck for a moment then moved him away. 'So what's all this about you not going to school?'

'But I...'

Edge held up his finger. 'Joe, remember I was your age once. So there's nothing you can get up to that me and my pals didn't get up to ourselves. Do you know how many times I mooched off school for a quick fag down the Green? It's what lads your age do. But now that you've been caught just put up your hand and promise not to do it again. All right?'

'But...'

'No buts.'

Joe gritted his teeth and nodded. Edge patted him on the cheek. 'So tell me about this mysterious girlfriend.'

'What?'

'Mickey said you have a girlfriend. He said you brought her home yesterday.'

'No. That wasn't a girlfriend. That was Alex. You remember Alex, don't you, Grandad?'

Edge managed to keep smiling as he shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

'Ah, you do.' Joe pointed to the door with his thumb. 'She used to live here. You must remember her. She was your friend.'

Edge sat up in his chair so fast it looked as if he'd been zapped with an electric probe. His face turned grey and he tried to speak but no words came out.

'Joe,' Vicky grabbed a fistful of the boy's jacket and pulled him across to the sink. 'I want to know why you didn't go to school. Your teacher is furious and he's threatening to send for the kid catcher and you know what'll happen to you then. They'll put you in the monastery. Or send you to Limerick to the Borstal. Is that what you want, to be sent away from home? Is it? Because if it is just tell me now and I'll send for him myself.'

'Get off me.' Joe was struggling to loosen her grip but Vicky pinned him tighter against the sink.

'Vicky,' Foley went over and took Joe by the arm. 'Let me have a word with him.'

Vicky put both hands up in surrender and Foley manoeuvred Joe to a chair by the table. Edge was still sitting up straight. His mouth was a tight line.

'So what's going on, Joe?' Foley pulled out a chair and sat with his arms leaning on the back. 'Is there something going on at school that you should tell us about? Is someone picking on you?'

'No.' Again the sulky look.

'Then why aren't you going? You heard what your mother said. If the school inspector comes looking for you he could take you away. You know that, don't you?'

'But I wasn't mooching. I was helping Alex.'

Edge made a noise like a deflating balloon and Foley glanced up. Edge's head was nodding back and forth as if he had no control over it. 'That wasn't Alex,' he said in a hoarse groan. 'She went back home, Joe. She went back home years ago so it couldn't be her.'

'But it is, Grandad. That's why she asked me to help her. She remembered me and she asked me to help her.'

'Help her with what? What's wrong with her?'

'She said she left something in her room when she had to go away and now she needs it back. She said it's really important and she has to find it.'

'So you're saying she asked you to help her find something she left behind all those years ago?' Foley asked.

'Yes. She saw me going to school and she said she remembered me and she asked me if I remembered her. I didn't at first until she told me she used to live in our house and she was great friends with my Grandad. She told me she didn't want anyone to know she was back in town because some people wouldn't like it. So it had to be our secret. But there was something very important she had to get from her old room. She said she would make it worth my while if I helped her find it.'

'So what was it? What was she looking for?' Vicky asked.

'A letter.'

'What kind of letter? What's supposed to be in it?'

'All she said was that it was a brown envelope and it was very, very important. She made me swear to keep it a secret because she didn't want anyone knowing about it.'

'So did she find it?'

Joe shook his head. 'She did not. And she got cross with me because I told her there would be no one in the house and she'd have plenty of time to find it. But she couldn't find it in her old room so she went upstairs to Ma's room. And she was still here when the lads came in from school and saw her. Then she...' he glared over at his mother, '...came in too and Alex ran away.'

Vicky went to shout at him but it turned into a cough and she covered her mouth with her apron.

'So where is Alex now?'

Joe shrugged and Foley was surprised when his eyes filled up. 'I don't know. I spent all day looking for her but I couldn't find her anywhere.'

Liam Edge shuffled to his feet and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. 'So how can you be sure it was Alex? You were only a little fella when...'

'Of course, I'm sure. I saw her. I spoke to her. She told me she was Alex who used to live here. Why would she say she was if she... I remember her. I know it's Alex.'

'But none of this explains why you didn't go to school, though, does it?' Vicky looked as if she was going to take a swipe at him and he ducked and ran over to the door.

'I didn't go to school because I was trying to find Alex. I told you already. I have to find Alex. She needs me.'

'That's rubbish. You're just using that as an excuse to mooch off school and it won't wash with me, young man. I've had a gut's full of your nonsense, so get upstairs and...'

'No. I will not. I'm going out to find Alex and you're not going to stop me.'

Joe moved so fast he was out of the front door and had slammed it behind him before anyone could react. Vicky gave a sob and buried her face in her hands. And Liam Edge blew smoke down his nose.

'So what's this letter they're looking for?' he said as he stubbed his cigarette butt out in a saucer.

'What?' Foley sat back down. 'You don't think for one moment that the woman is ...you know it isn't Alex Cassidy.'

Edge drew himself up to his full height and gave Foley his hardest stare. 'And what makes you so certain?'

'Because... you know why it can't be her.'

'Well, maybe if we can find this famous letter it might prove it one way or the other.' Edge sucked on his teeth and shuffled across to the door.

Chapter 22

Jackie Maher was spreading fresh sawdust on the floor of his butcher shop when he heard someone coming in the door behind him. He turned around with his best customer-friendly smile.

'Good afternoon...'

When he saw it was Eamon Foley the smile turned genuine and he rubbed his hands on his apron before holding one out. 'Eamon, long time no see. How're things?'

Foley gave the hand a warm shake. 'Good, Jackie. How about yourself?'

'Ah, I can't complain. Well, I could but who'd take any notice. So is it Eamon...'

he nodded at the uniform, '...or is it Guard Foley, since you're looking so officious? I don't suppose you just wandered in for a couple of pork chops and a pound of tripe. It's Vicky who usually comes and gets the stuff for your tea.' Jackie touched the side of his nose. 'She has a good eye for a quality cut, you know. She only gets the best for you. No wonder you're getting a bit robust around the middle there.'

Foley laughed and pretended to throw a punch at the butcher's nose. 'Thanks for that, Mr Maher. She speaks highly of you too, you know. But you're right, it is business today I'm afraid.'

'Then come into the office.' Jackie led the way around the counter and into a room the size of a cupboard. He lifted some papers off the chair for Foley to sit down then squeezed behind the small desk and moved some more papers before sitting down himself. 'Would you have time for a cup of tea? I'll give one of the lads a shout. It'll only take a minute.'

'No, no. I just had one at home. But thanks all the same. And I'm sorry to be disturbing you like this.'

'Not at all.' Jackie waved it away. 'So how can I be of service, Eamon? Is something wrong?'

'No, no, it's nothing like that, Jackie. Just a general enquiry. I understand you deliver meat to a ship called The Fenit Star when it's docked in the Basin.'

Jackie nodded. 'The Polish ship? We do indeed. They're great customers. Lovely people. And one of the few that pay on time. So what about them?'

'Well, I was wondering if I could speak to the lad who usually does that round. I'm told he has ginger hair.'

'Oh, that would be Sean Carmady. He has red hair. But he's not the only one who does the deliveries. I have three others. They take turns when we're busy.'

'It's the ginger one I'd like to talk to if that's all right. Sean, did you say?'

Jackie leant towards the door and gave a shout that was like a firecracker going off. There was some shuffling and clattering then a young man appeared, rubbing his hands on his apron.

‘Yes, boss?’

‘Sean, this is Guard Foley. He’d like a few words with you.’

At first glance, the boy looked to be about sixteen. His pale face was a carpet of freckles and his thick ginger hair was in need of a trim. As his eyes darted between the two men Foley got the impression he’d seen him before. There was something very familiar about him.

‘What do you want?’ The voice was defensive.

Foley stood up for Sean to sit on the chair. The boy hesitated but when Jackie nodded he sat down reluctantly. Foley stood to the side so that Sean had to look up at him.

‘Sean, I want to ask you about one of the crewmen on the Fenit Star. A fella called Viktor Marks.’

‘Who?’ Sean spoke too quickly and something danced across his face. He swallowed hard and again his eyes flicked between his boss and Foley.

‘Sean, you know him. Every time you take a delivery over there he’s the one who signs for it. So you...’

‘Every boat I go to someone has to sign for the delivery. How am I supposed to remember who...?’

‘Because you always have a cup of tea with him. And you have a fag with him too. Every time, Sean. So don’t lie to me. You know Viktor Marks, don’t you?’

Sean clamped his hands in his lap and gave a sullen shake of the head. ‘So he gives me a cup of tea. What’s wrong with that?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with that.’ Foley had to swallow his irritation before he could continue. ‘Nothing at all. I just don’t understand why you’re denying that you know him.’

‘Well, I don’t know him.’ Again the sullen shake of the head.

‘Sean, the reason I’m here is because we pulled a body out of the river over near Blennerville and it’s been identified as Viktor.’

Sean groaned and covered his face with his hands, and his head dropped so low it touched the desk. Foley glanced at Jackie who shrugged.

‘So do you know anything about that, Sean?’

Sean’s head snapped up and his eyes flickered everywhere except on Foley. ‘What? No. How would I know anything about that? I don’t know anything about that. I told you already, I hardly knew him. I only ever saw him when I delivered the orders.’

‘You know him better than that, Sean. You were seen walking around the Green with him.’

‘I was not...’

Foley took the ring from his pocket and held it in front of the boy’s face. ‘Anyway, he was wearing this when we found him. Do you know where he got it, by any chance?’

This time the boy’s hands jerked and his face went a darker shade of red. ‘How would I know that? I told you, I didn’t know him that well.’

‘Did you give it to him?’

‘No!’

Foley let the silence hang until Sean couldn’t stand it any longer and had to fill it. ‘I didn’t give it to him. Why would I be giving a ring to another fella? I’m not... fellas don’t give rings to other fellas.’

Sean was shaking so much now his feet were tapping on the floor.

‘Let me see that.’ Jackie reached across, took the ring and held it up to the light. Then he practically threw it back at the boy. ‘Oh for feck sake, Sean. What the hell did you think you were doing? You took this from the odd box and gave it to your friend? Why?’

Sean’s feet tapped harder as Foley picked up the ring and waved it in his face again.

‘Well?’

Sean turned away and closed his eyes, and Foley grabbed his shoulder.

‘Listen to me, son. Right now we’re trying to find out how a young man died. We want to know if he was unlawfully killed and if so who killed him. So we need all the help we can get from the people who knew him. Now you were his friend. You gave him this ring. Isn’t that right?’

Sean pulled away from Foley and gave another sullen shrug.

‘For God’s sake, Sean.’ Jackie slapped his hand on the desk and Sean jumped. ‘Answer the man. Why did you give him the feckin ring?’

‘Because he couldn’t afford the one in the jeweller’s window.’ Sean’s voice crackled as he rushed to answer.

‘Who? Viktor?’

‘Yeah. He said he knew somebody who would love a ring like that. But it cost too much. He liked it but he couldn’t afford to buy it. Then I remembered the ring in the odd box and I... I just borrowed it to show him. He was delighted. It was too big for his finger but he didn’t mind.’

‘So he took it from you to give to someone else? Did he say who? A girlfriend?’

‘I don’t know. His English is not good, you know? Especially when he gets excited. I think he said a name but I didn’t understand it. Something foreign. Anyway, he wore it himself. He said when he got paid he would get it adjusted.’

Foley took out his notebook and flicked it open on a clean page. ‘So where did you get the ring, did you say?’

Sean looked at his boss and when Jackie nodded he bit his lip. ‘It was in the odd box.’

‘What’s the odd box?’

‘We keep an old tin box out in the yard where we butcher the animals.’ Jackie pointed in the general direction. ‘When we recover odd bits and pieces the animals can’t digest we put them in the box.’

He saw the look on Foley’s face and chuckled. ‘Sorry, Eamon. Unless you work in the business you wouldn’t know about the strange things we find in the animals. Usually, rubbish that we put in the bin. But often we’ll find something the farmer might want back. You know, a bracelet, a medal, anything small and valuable that might have fallen into the feed. Or on the ground near where they’re rummaging. We found that ring inside a pig.’

Foley felt his stomach turn. ‘Are you sure it’s the same one?’

‘Yes. I remember the markings on it. I keep meaning to give it back to the fella we bought the pig from. But to be honest I keep forgetting.’

Foley took off his cap and wiped his forehead. ‘So, just to get this straight in my mind, you found the ring in a pig and you put it in a box. Then Sean took it and gave it to Viktor. Is that right?’

Sean and Jackie nodded in unison.

‘And you can remember the fella who sold you that pig? How can you be so sure it was that pig? I mean, how many pigs do you slaughter in your back yard?’

Jackie took a battered ledger from the shelf behind him and flicked through the pages. ‘It’ll all be in here, Eamon. It’s something my father taught me. Record everything. Mention everything, weight, marks, missing bits, crooked bits. Anything that you can refer back to if there’s a query. So if we find anything in an animal we log that too. And here we have it. Jacob Butts, pig breeder. Date and time of purchase. Date the pig was slaughtered, the date the ring was found.’

Foley scribbled in his notebook, picked up the ring and put it back in his pocket. ‘So Sean, have you any idea what Viktor was doing in Blennerville on Monday night?’

Sean sank lower in his seat. ‘No.’

‘And you? Where were you on Monday night?’

‘I was at home.’

‘You weren’t anywhere near Blennerville?’

‘I was.’

‘You were in Blennerville on Monday night? What were you doing there?’

‘I live there.’

‘What? You live in Blennerville?’

‘Yeah. My Da has a pub there.’

Suddenly Foley realized why he recognized the boy. It was the eyes. And the red hair.

‘Carmady? Of course. You must be Eleanor’s brother. So how come you’re working in a butcher’s shop?’

‘Because I get paid for working here. I have my own money. If I was in the pub I’d have to ask my Da for money. Anyway, there’s not enough work for all of us these days.’

‘Right.’ Foley wished he had that cup of tea now. Or something stronger. ‘So on Monday night, you were at home in your Da’s pub. Did Viktor come into the pub? Did you see him at all?’

Sean’s breathing was becoming erratic and he looked as if he was going to be sick. ‘No. I didn’t see him. I don’t go into the bar. I was in my room all the time so I wouldn’t know if he came into the bar or not. I never go in the bar. Ask my Da. He’ll tell you. Ask him. Call my Da and ask him if you don’t believe me. Go on, ask him.’ Spittle dribbled down his chin and his eyes were wet with the makings of tears. He hugged himself and started to sway back and forth on the chair. ‘Go on. Call my Da if...’

Jackie stood up and patted him on the shoulder. ‘All right, Sean. Take it easy now. Just calm down. Guard Foley is only doing his job. He has to know what happened to your friend, that’s all. So go on, go and get yourself a cup of tea. Then clock off early and go home.’

Sean jumped up and squeezed past Foley, and then he was gone.

Jackie sat back in his chair. 'Jasus, Eamon. You were a bit hard on the lad. That's a side of you I haven't seen before. I'm not sure I want to see it again either. Just warn me first if you're ever going to come after me, won't you?'

'I'm sorry, Jackie. This case is so bloody confusing it's driving everyone up the wall.'

'I know. Murder is always messy. If it is murder. And that ring ... I don't get it. What would Sean giving it to a friend have to do with him being killed? Do you think Sean was involved in some way?'

Foley put his cap back on. 'I don't know, to tell you the truth. The thing is the ring belonged to a young fella who disappeared around Christmas time. His family swear he would never deliberately take it off because it was handed down from father to son and all kinds of bad luck would happen to him if he did. So the big question is; how did it get into your pig?'

'Who are we talking about, Eamon.'

'Paudy Daly. He's the son of...'

'Mixer Daly, from the Spa?'

'So you know Mixer?'

'Oh yes. From way back when he wanted me to buy a wagon load of venison off him. It was all butchered and wrapped ready for sale. He got a bit pissed off when I pointed out the difference between venison and donkey. He never forgave me for that and he's boycotted me ever since.'

He walked Foley to the door and shook his hand. 'Eamon, I just hope Mixer's son hasn't ended up in someone's soup.'

Chapter 23

Liam Edge flicked his cigarette butt away as he climbed the Courthouse steps. Weariness dripped off him. And it wasn't just from the lack of sleep. The shock of someone pretending to be Alex Cassidy had rattled him badly. His confidence was already wafer-thin from worrying about how Vicky and Eamon would react when he told them he was selling the house. Now hearing a name that had haunted him for years knocked another lump out of what little he had left.

What the hell was it all about? Had Cassidy written something incriminating about him? Something that he wouldn't want his family finding out about? He tried to remember the times he'd spent with Cassidy but after three years a lot of it was hazy. Times and places merged into each other.

The only bit he remembered clearly was the moment he first saw her. It was like seeing the ghost of Alice Shea. The rest was less clear. He knew his time with Cassidy had caused tongues to wag. But it was common knowledge, nothing to be concerned about. But still, he was frazzled enough to go and look for this letter himself. So after Foley went back to work and Vicky took Mickey for a bath, Edge did a detailed search of Foley's room.

He took out every drawer and checked inside the unit, then the bottom and the back of each drawer. He turned the unit upside down to make sure there was

nothing taped to any part of it. He did the same with the wardrobe. He used a flashlight to inspect every gap in the skirting board, window frame and door frame. He probed every floorboard for signs of disturbance. Finally, he turned the bed upside down, checked every inch of the mattress and the bed frame. If anything had been hidden in that room he would have found it. But there was nothing.

He remembered Joe saying the woman also looked in Vicky's room, the one Edge was using while he was in town. Mick Collins used to occupy that room. Did Cassidy give him the letter to hide? Edge pretended to turn in early and very slowly and very quietly he went through the search routine again. And found nothing.

He spent the rest of the night lying in the dark with questions coming at him like shrapnel from a Gatling gun. How come she didn't know where the letter was hidden if she was supposed to be Alex Cassidy? Was there a letter? Was this some sort of weird hoax?

The grey light of the morning creeping in under the curtain was a blessed relief. He got up and drank numerous cups of tea until it was time to go to the courthouse and escape the nightmare for a while.

Now as he reached the top of the Courthouse steps he glanced over at two detectives leaning against a pillar. He didn't expect them to acknowledge him. And he was right. Malcolm Lane, the taller one, was the kind of officer Edge despised. Sneering, spiteful, he was only in the job for the power. His suit jacket was too big, allowing him to stand in a way that showed the world he was carrying a gun. And he revelled in the reaction he got from anyone who noticed it.

The other detective, Eamon Grey, was built like a brick shed and his eyes were constantly darting around him in a nervous sweep.

When Edge first arrived in Limerick three years ago he was shocked by the difference between the Tralee branch of the Gardaí and the Limerick division. He thought he'd been transferred to another planet. In Tralee, the officers showed respect for their superiors, even if they didn't particularly like them. But in Limerick, there was no such thing. Even junior officers questioned orders, sometimes even walking away and ignoring them.

The reception Liam Edge got on his first day as Inspector should have warned him. The Super was less than warm. He showed Edge to an office that was so small he couldn't push his chair back far enough to stretch his legs under the desk. Then he left Edge to introduce himself to the team which was as exciting as pulling teeth. They sat in sullen silence and looked at him with contempt. It was obvious to Edge that his predecessor was too timid to enforce any kind of discipline. And the Super was too frightened to interfere.

Maybe a few years ago Edge would have relished the challenge and turned it all around. But now he was too weighted down by what he'd done to Cassidy and the subsequent shooting incident at the Post Office to muster the courage to even try. So he sat back and just went through the motions, shuffling papers around his desk and biding his time to retirement.

But the daily strife was taking its toll on his nerves and now he couldn't stand it any longer. The magic was well and truly gone out of the job. The dreams and the hopes had evaporated like the mist in sunlight. It was time to move on, sell the two houses and get out while he could.

Someone shouting Alex made him spin around and it took him a moment to recognize the boy who was trotting past the courthouse. Joe Jnr was waving at someone who Edge couldn't see.

'Joe, wait.' Instinctively Edge started to skip down the steps after him. He'd gone halfway down when he turned back to the two detectives. 'If they call me tell them I won't be long.'

They looked at him with total indifference.

By the time Edge reached the street, Joe was already crossing the road and heading towards Denny Street. And even from this distance Edge knew the woman he was with was not Alex Cassidy. She was too tall and a lot chunkier.

Edge's first thought was to catch up with them and find out who the woman was. Shake the answers out of her if need be. But he knew that if she managed to break away from him she'd go to ground and he'd never find her again. It was best to follow at a safe distance and see where she went. He could decide what to do about her later.

He watched them go around the side of the Ashe Memorial Hall and cross the Green to the small gate near the old castle ruins. And by the time Edge got to the gate they'd vanished.

He stood perfectly still and listened. Nature threw a blanket of noise over him, crows rowing in the forest of huge trees around the park, the breeze from the mountain rustling the thick ivy clinging to the castle wall, dogs yelping, people laughing as they walked by.

Then to his left, he heard the groan of an old door being pulled open. Seconds later it shut again. The old Sullivan place. That house had been abandoned for years, ever since Paul Sullivan beat his wife to death and then hanged himself from the bannisters in the hall. Now it was smothered in wild bushes and all sorts of trees. Thick ivy was wrapped so tightly around it that it was hard to make out where the windows used to be.

Edge crept up to the gap in the bushes that led to the front door, waited a moment then walked softly along the path. The ground was spongy with dried moss which helped to deaden his footsteps as he climbed the two steps to the porch. The paint was bubbled and split and the brass knocker was tarnished, but the door still looked solid even after all this time. Someone had forced it open without causing any noticeable damage. Edge touched it with his fingers, testing it, then pushed it slightly harder until it moved. He took his time, not wanting to alert whoever was inside.

The hallway was a mess. Rubble from the collapsed ceiling covered the floor. He stepped in, careful where he put his feet. The only sound was the natural creaking and groaning of the old timbers. He looked for a path through the rubbish but he couldn't see an obvious one.

When he sensed someone behind him he half turned. Years ago he'd have rolled away from it, but now he just didn't have the speed or the energy. The blow caused a vicious white light that instantly turned into the deepest blackness.

Chapter 24

Foley's instructions were clear. The Super was more concerned about what happened to Paudy Daly than he was about the murder of a Polish crewman. So Foley was told to hand everything he knew about the death of Viktor Marks over to Guard Mitchell in Blennerville and let him deal with it. Then he was to go and interview the farmer who sold Jackie Maher the pig in which they found Paudy's ring. Foley wished John Guerin was with him. Parts of Kerry were notoriously hostile to lone police officers calling on people.

But as Foley turned onto the bridge at Blennerville and spotted the beautiful girl walking along the footpath he was glad he was on his own.

Eleanor Carmady was wearing a white cotton dress with yellow trim, and her long red hair swayed around her shoulders with each step she took. Foley had to wait for a truck and a pony to go by before he could swing his bike across the road. Eleanor noticed several people look at something behind her and she spun around. Foley gave a cheery wave as he braked beside her. She looked him up and down, and he felt as giddy as a schoolboy when she gave him one of her amazing smiles.

'Good morning, Guard... ah...'

'Foley. Eamon Foley.'

'Good morning, Guard Eamon Foley.' She had a chuckle in her voice. 'What are you doing wandering around the countryside on a beautiful morning like this?'

Foley got off the bike and walked along with her. 'I'm on my way to see Guard Mitchell.'

'About the young fella whose body you found?'

'Yes. We have a name for him now. He was a cook on a Polish ship called the Fenit Star. He was called Viktor Marks.'

The smile slipped from Eleanor's face and she turned away. 'We heard.'

'Oh...'

'It's a small town, Guard Eamon Foley. Everyone was talking about it, wanting to know who the poor man was. You know what it's like. It's not every day that a body is found in your backyard. Everyone was upset when we found out who he was. He was a lovely man. But I suppose it was a relief too that he wasn't one of us. You know, someone from the village?'

'Are you saying you knew him?'

'I did.' She flicked her hair back. 'Well, I can't say I knew him as such. But he came into the pub for a drink a few times. He usually sat at the bar and quietly sipped his pint. He didn't say much. Sometimes I got the impression that he didn't understand English. So he drank his pint and then wandered off.'

Foley stopped and took out his notebook, checking a page. 'But when we asked you if you saw...'

'You asked if we saw a stranger,' Eleanor interrupted. 'That fella wasn't a stranger. We assumed you were talking about someone we hadn't seen before.'

Foley flipped the notebook shut again. 'Oh, right. So you're saying he was actually in your pub on the night he was killed?'

'He was. If I remember right, he came in around nine, nine-thirty, and stayed until after closing time.'

'He took that long over one pint?'

‘He usually did. He’d just sit there quietly observing the world around him then shuffle off.’

As they reached the other side of the bridge Foley felt his eyes drawn to the grey shape of the old windmill and he must have frowned because Eleanor turned to see what he was looking at.

‘Are you all right there, Guard Eamon Foley?’

‘Yes,’ Foley answered quickly, but it was without conviction.

‘Then why are you giving our beautiful windmill such a dirty look. Are you not very fond of it?’

‘Well, I can’t say it’s my favourite. I certainly wouldn’t go out of my way to spend a night in it.’

Eleanor chuckled. ‘Now isn’t that strange? I thought I was the only one who felt it was as attractive as a boil on your bum.’

‘Really? So what’s it ever done to you?’

‘Don’t laugh. According to my Ma, I was a little dote when I was a baby. Placid, good-natured. But there were times when I’d suddenly become agitated, hysterical even, for no apparent reason. Then one day when I was a bit older and she was taking me into town, it dawned on her that it was always when we were passing the windmill that I had my tantrum. She asked what was upsetting me so much and I said my sister was in the windmill and she was crying. My mother told me not to be so stupid. I didn’t have a sister. But I insisted my sister was in there and she was going round and round, and she was crying.’

She glanced at Foley and gave an anxious smile. ‘I don’t remember any of it now, of course. I must have just grown out of it. But sometimes I get the strangest feeling when I’m passing by as if it’s watching me.’ She tapped the side of her head. ‘I probably sound quite mad, don’t I?’

‘No,’ Foley said quickly. ‘Not at all. I hate to say it but I often got that feeling myself. My mother said it was because I read too many of those cheap comics with monsters and ghosts. Maybe she was right.’

‘Will you come in for a cup of tea?’ Eleanor asked as they reached the pub. ‘My Da usually has a pot on the go so it won’t be any trouble.’

Foley knew he should have said no. He had too much to do today. But he was mesmerized by the twinkle in the smiling eyes and he couldn’t stop the yes coming out.

Eleanor led the way around the side of the building into a large yard, and she opened the door to the kitchen. She guided Foley to a chair by the large table and got two mugs off the dresser.

‘Is your mother here today?’

Eleanor gave a soft sigh. ‘I’m afraid not. She’s not with us anymore.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ Foley took his cap off and put it on the table. ‘I didn’t... what happened?’

‘She was killed during an air raid in Coventry.’

‘Coventry?’

‘Yep. Coventry. About a year ago. The official story is she went over there to look after her sick sister. But no one questioned the fact that it was eleven years ago. And she never came home once to see us in all that time.’

Her voice had lost its usual chuckle and her face was paler, making her eyes seem larger and more intense. Foley shifted in his seat.

‘It was only after she died that our Da spoke about what happened back then.’ Eleanor put the mugs on the table. ‘He always said she was too beautiful for a small town like this. She was like an exotic bird trapped in a world she didn’t belong in. He’d been in love with her from the moment he first saw her in junior school. But he always knew in his heart he wouldn’t be able to hold onto her. One day someone would show her the gateway to another life and she would just fly away.’

She brought the teapot to the table and poured some into the mugs, then she put a jug of milk in front of Foley. ‘The person who showed her that gateway was a writer from Coventry. He was over here researching for his new book. He offered her a job as his secretary. The pub wasn’t doing very well at the time. We were struggling. So she used it as an excuse, saying she’d be able to send money home. She made noises about it being for just a few months, that she’d be back as soon as the debts were paid off and all that rubbish.’

The sob came out before she could swallow it back and Foley stood up, but she waved him away. ‘God, I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I told you that. I’ve never, ever spoken to anyone about that before. Not even to my best friend. I’m so, so sorry.’

‘Not at all,’ Foley sat back down.

‘Does everyone react like that when they’re talking to a policeman?’ Eleanor dropped some sugar into her mug and stirred it vigorously. ‘Is it some sort of clever technique to make people disclose all their darkest secrets?’

‘No,’ Foley watched her closely to see if she was being serious and when he caught the twinkle in her eyes again he gave an exaggerated shrug. ‘Well, actually, yes. We’re trained to give the impression that we’re like priests and it would be a mortal sin to lie to us. You’d be amazed how many people admit to things they had nothing to do with. They even insist we arrest them for it.’

‘I thought as much.’ Eleanor pulled out a chair and sat opposite Foley. ‘Anyway, getting back to poor Viktor, do you know what happened to him? Was it an accident or was he killed like the rumours have it?’

‘We’re still not sure about that. But now we know he was here on Monday evening we can go back and talk to all your customers again. I take it your brother Sean was here that night.’

‘Sean? Why do you ask that?’

‘I understand Sean and Viktor were friends. I just assumed they would have spoken to each other.’

Eleanor looked genuinely surprised. ‘I didn’t know about that. Sean never said he knew Viktor.’

She rubbed her eyes. ‘The thing is, Sean doesn’t come into the bar anymore. When he comes home from work he goes straight up to his room and we don’t see him again until the morning.’

‘Oh? So he doesn’t drop in for a quick drink, say hello to the customers?’

‘No.’ Eleanor paused as she chose the right words. ‘I’m afraid my Da and Sean don’t get on at the moment. Sean is going through that awkward stage right now. You know, when he doesn’t know if he’s a man or if he’s still a little boy? And he’s

downright confused about it all. He's sulky, moody, snappy. He's rude to everyone, cross at everything. We used to be great pals but now I don't even get a hello out of him. So it's better he stays out of the way until he sorts himself out. Do you know what I mean?'

'Oh, yes.' Foley sipped his tea. 'It's a strange time in a young fella's life all right. Some lads find themselves in a very dark place. They feel as if the whole world has turned against them, criticising everything they say and do. They don't know how to cope with all the hostility. And if they fight back they come off worse.'

Eleanor's eyebrows rose. 'There speaks the voice of experience.'

Foley spluttered into his tea.

'Seriously though,' Eleanor continued. 'My Da was very upset when Sean decided he didn't want to work in the bar anymore. He knew we couldn't afford to employ anyone else so we'd have to share the long hours between the two of us. Da was furious. He wanted to kick him out on his ear, make him fend for himself. But I begged him to let him live here. He couldn't afford a place of his own. So Da said he could stay on condition he paid rent for his room and board.'

'How's that working out?'

'Good. Almost. Sometimes Sean pays with a lump of meat he acquired from Jackie Maher.' She put her fingers to her lips. 'We don't ask, and he doesn't volunteer an answer. But Da is still upset and they haven't spoken for ages.'

'Well, I'm sorry to hear that.' Foley drained his mug and stood up. 'Thank you for the tea. It was lovely. And the chat.'

Eleanor stood up too. 'You're welcome, Guard Eamon Foley.'

'Eamon,' Foley grinned as he put his cap back on. 'Just Eamon will do.'

'All right, so.' She gave another beautiful laugh as she brushed past Foley and opened the door. 'Goodbye, Just Eamon.'

Foley couldn't help laughing too. 'Can I ask you,' he stuttered, 'when we were here the other day a young fella was bringing in some barrels ...'

'Eugene?'

'I got the impression that you and he were... well, you know?'

Eleanor held his gaze, letting her eyebrows rise again and setting her mouth into a question. Foley felt his face go red and he stepped past her quickly.

'I'm sorry.' He knew he's killed the moment. 'I have to go. I'll see you around sometime. And thanks again for the tea.'

Chapter 25

Liam Edge felt as if his head was split in two. He struggled to open his eyes and when he did the tears poured down his face and mixed with whatever was leaking from his nose. He desperately wanted to wipe it away but he couldn't move his hands. They were tied behind his back. He was obviously on a chair because it wobbled when he moved.

The musty room was small with a tiny window. Strings of ivy snaked through the broken glass and hung down the wall. Lumps of broken plaster from the ceiling littered the floor.

Through the buzzing in his head, he could hear voices in the distance, soft at first then more aggressive as they got closer. Something crashed against a wall and was followed by a sharp cry. Now they were outside the door.

‘Why the feck did you lead him here?’ The man’s voice was slurred and rasping. ‘He’s a feckin cop, for God’s sake, and you’re after leading him here. I knew you were a feckin eejit, but to let a cop follow you home, what kind of stupid cow...’

‘How was I supposed to know he was following me?’ This time it was a woman’s voice, heavy with sobs. ‘I’m sorry. I just didn’t see him. If I’d seen him I would have lost him, wouldn’t I? But I didn’t. How could I? I haven’t got eyes in the back of my head.’

There was a slap and a yelp, then some more shuffling. ‘Stop it. That hurt, you pig.’

‘Well, it’s all your stupid fault, you dozy mare. You brought him here so it’s up to you to get rid of him.’

‘What? How?’

‘I don’t feckin care.’ Another slap and a louder yelp. ‘Just do it. That bastard had better be gone before I get back. Got it?’

There was more crashing and shuffling, and angry footsteps rushed past the window and faded into the distance. For a minute the only sound Edge could hear was the natural creaking noises of the old house. Then someone began moving around outside the door again, muttering furiously and kicking at the rubble, cranking up the agitation until she was almost shouting at herself. Suddenly the door flew open and a woman stormed up to within an inch of Edge’s face.

‘Why were you following me?’ she shrieked. Something glistened around her mouth. ‘What do you want?’

Edge’s natural form of defence was to attack and he threw his head forward. The woman jumped back immediately. ‘I wasn’t following you,’ he roared. ‘I was following my grandson. Where is he? What have you done with him?’

The woman blinked rapidly and glanced back at the door. ‘What are you talking about? There’s no one here.’

‘Yes, there is. My grandson is here.’ Edge rattled the chair and growled in frustration. ‘I saw you with him. What have you done with him?’

The woman leapt forward and clipped him on the chin with her knuckles. ‘There is no one here, I’m telling you. So shut up and tell me why you were following me?’

Edge tried to shake the wet from his eyes. ‘You know I’m with the Gardaí?’

‘No shit,’ the woman snorted. ‘You don’t think the uniform gives you away?’

‘Then you know you’re so deep in the shit right now you’ll be needing a diving bell.’ Edge shook his head again but his eyes were still blurred. ‘Kidnapping a guard is a serious offence. So do yourself a favour and don’t make it any worse than it is. Let me go. C’mon, don’t be stupid.’

‘Nobody kidnapped you.’ The woman turned in a circle with her hands flapping wildly. ‘This is all your fault. Why did you have to come sneaking around here? We didn’t know who you were. We just saw someone creeping up on us and we were defending ourselves. This is all your feckin fault.’

‘Then you can use that in your defence. So just cut me loose and we can sort something out like civilized people.’

The woman bent double and held her stomach as if she was going to be sick, but she straightened up again just as quickly. 'No. You're not going anywhere. I need to think. Stop talking. I need to think.'

'You haven't got time to think. People will be out looking for me right now. I'm supposed to be in court today. They'll find me very quickly and you'll be arrested and you'll be sent to jail. So c'mon, cut me loose.'

'No they won't.' The woman's face was almost touching his again. 'How will they find you? No one knows where you are, so don't give me any of that feckin rubbish.'

'People saw me coming here.' Edge couldn't move his head back any further so he turned his face sideways instead. 'People saw me crossing the Green. People saw me out there in the street. People always remember if they see a guard in their street. So they'll be here looking for me faster than you can blow your nose. Believe me.'

'Stop it.' The woman did a little dance and started walking towards the door. 'I'm not listening.'

'Look, what's this all about, anyway?' Edge didn't want her to leave. He needed her here to reason with her, find her weakness. He lowered his voice and tried to inject some sense of trust into it. 'Tell me what's going on. Maybe I can do something to help. Is it something to do with Joe, my grandson? Has it got something to do with you breaking into my house?'

'I didn't break into your house,' the woman snapped. 'That young fella let me in.'

'Yeah? Only because you lied to him.'

The woman leant so close to Edge again he felt her spittle hit him when she spoke. 'I did not lie to him.'

'Yes, you did. He told me. You said you were Alex Cassidy and you used to live in his house. You pretended you forgot something when you left and it was still in your old room.'

The woman stood up to her full height and touched her chest with both hands. 'I'm not pretending to be Alex Cassidy, you thick eejit. I am Alex Cassidy.'

'No, you're not,' Edge spluttered. 'Alex Cassidy is...'

The woman clipped him again, this time on the side of the head. 'Alex Cassidy is what? What are you saying? Alex Cassidy is what?'

'I'm just saying ... Well, you don't look anything like her, that's for sure.' Edge jerked his head forward again but this time the woman didn't back away. Instead, she lifted his chin with her finger.

'Oh my good God. I've only just realized who you are.' Her eyes bulged with a strange fury. 'The young fella said his grandad was home but I didn't... holy shit, so you're the famous Sgt Edge. Well, well, well.'

Edge rattled the chair again and tugged at the ropes. 'Inspector, actually. And you're not Alex Cassidy. I don't know what you're up to but it isn't going to work. I can tell you that right now.'

This time the spit caught him full in the face and he gasped. 'This is not a joke, Sgt Edge. The little cow you thought was Alex Cassidy was a lying thief called Mary O'Mara. And she caused me a whole lot of grief. She stole something from me. Something really, really important. And believe me when I tell you it is a

matter of life and death that I get it back. Do you understand me, Sgt Edge? A matter of life or death.'

Edge tried to read her face but he couldn't focus through the tears that were still stinging his eyes.

'So that's why you broke into my house.' He blew away something that was trickling into his mouth. 'Joe said you were looking for something. A letter of some sort? Well, let me assure you, there is no letter in that house. I searched both of the rooms and there is nothing hidden in either of them. I have years of experience in searching for stuff. I promise you, there's no hiding place that I can't find. There is no letter in my house.'

The woman raised her hand like a weapon but then dropped it sharply. 'It has to be there. That cow stole it from me. She hid it there, I'm sure of it. I want it back.'

'But it's years since she lived in that house. Even if she had the letter back then, what are the chances of it still being there now? And what took you so long to come looking for it, anyway? I don't understand, if it was that important, surely...'

'Because we didn't know where she went after she robbed me. We only found that out recently.'

'But as I said, it was years ago. She... well, if it was as valuable as you say it was, surely she would have taken it with her when she left. It could be anywhere by now.'

He jerked back when she gave him another clip, this time just over his eye. 'Now you know that is not true, don't you, Sgt Edge? That woman didn't go anywhere.'

Edge spluttered and tried to stand up. 'Yes, she did. She went back home. Years ago. Ask anyone.'

The hand that shot out and gripped Edge by the throat was as sharp and as cold as the talons of an eagle. 'You know that girl never left Tralee, Sgt Edge,' the woman hissed. 'Now I don't give a monkey's shit what you did with her. You could have chopped her up into little pieces and fed her to the crows for all I care. All I'm concerned about is that letter. I want it back. And I don't care what I have to do to get it. Do you understand me?'

She shoved him away so hard the chair tipped back and his head hit the wall behind him. He gave a loud groan and rocked himself upright again. 'Look, this is getting out of control.' He sucked on his lip and tasted something unpleasant. 'There's no need for any of it. I can see you're distressed about this letter and you're desperate to get it back. But this isn't the way to go about it, is it? Kidnapping a police officer, for God sake. What's so important about a friggin letter that you're willing to kidnap a guard for it? Tell me, maybe I can suggest something.'

The woman ran at him again with her hand raised but just clipped him on the arm this time. 'Do you think I'm that stupid that I'd tell you anything, you being a guard? All you need to know is that I want that letter back. And it has to be soon. Otherwise, things will really get out of control.'

'Look, I might be able to help you find it. Untie me and we can work something out. Maybe we can figure out what Alex did with it.'

'I am Alex.' The woman did another little dance, scattering rubble around her. 'That other lying cow was called Mary O'Mara.'

'All right. Calm down. So let's try to figure out what this Mary O'Mara did with the letter. But first, we need to know why she was pretending to be you. Was it because of the letter? Did she need to pretend she was you before she could do anything with it?'

The woman tapped the side of her head. 'No. She was pretending to be me because she's feckin simple, that's why. Do you know the very first thing she ever said to me? She said she loved my name. Can you believe that? I knew there was something not right with her the day I first met her. The way she sucked up to everyone, purring like a kitten and acting like your best friend. God, it was vomit making.'

Edge sensed a crack in her defence and he knew he had to probe it. But he also knew he had to tread very carefully. 'So when was this? How did you meet her?'

'I was in service. I was a maid in a big house in Dublin. One day this dozy cow appeared in my room. The bosses told me we had to share a room. I wasn't happy about it, but I had no choice. But I knew she was puddled the way she made up stories about herself. One minute she said she was from an orphanage and she was only sixteen then the next she was supposed to be engaged to some rich farmer. She said her father was dead, then he was a Spitfire pilot somewhere in England. She seemed to soak up everything people said about themselves, embellish it and then apply it to herself.' The woman spat on the floor. 'The thing about lying is you have to have a great memory. She didn't. If she was challenged about something she said, she denied ever saying it in the first place. So eventually people avoided her like the plague.'

'So how come she knew about the letter? Did you tell her?'

'Of course, I didn't tell her,' the woman practically howled. 'I wouldn't tell that bitch the time of day. No one knew about the letter. It was... too important for anyone to know about it.'

'So how did she find out about it?'

'I don't know.' Again the flapping of the arms. 'But she was sneaky enough to go poking through my stuff when I was out of the room. Maybe she found it then.'

'And she realized it was valuable?'

The woman grunted and raked her fingers through her hair. 'I don't know if she did or not. All I know is she stole it.'

Just as Edge went to speak something flew back his throat and caused a coughing fit that made him rock violently for a few minutes. The woman stood back and waited for it to stop.

'So,' Edge gasped when it eventually subsided. 'If she didn't know it was valuable, why did she steal it? And why would she pretend to be you?'

'I just said, didn't I? I don't feckin know. All I know is one morning she was gone and so was my purse and everything in it. And also my best coat.'

'So...'

'And also one of the guests. A man who was staying there. He's been injured and they were looked after him.' She pointed into the air as she recalled the details. There was still a reluctance there, but she continued anyway. 'There was holy murder about it. He was very important. And he was married. They weren't

happy that he ran away with a common chamber maid. He was from Dublin and a lot of people were very anxious to find him, so naturally, everyone went there looking for him. We went there too, looking for our letter, but it was like trying to follow a road in thick fog. No one knew where they went, or where they were hiding.'

She looked at Edge under her eyes.

'Then a few weeks ago we met a man called Mike Collins. Remember him? He told us he once knew a girl called Alex Cassidy. He was drunk and maudlin, saying how fond of her he was, and that she was taken from him so suddenly. And in strange circumstances too. Your name came up, Sgt Edge. He said he once rented one of your rooms. And he told us about the intense obsession you had for this Alex Cassidy. And how one day she just vanished off the face of the earth. He went through her stuff hoping to find out what happened to her, but he was scared off by the attention you were now giving him.'

She flicked Edge on the nose.

'Then he described her, and there was no doubt about it. We'd found where our letter went. And now we want it back.'

Edge felt his heart racing erratically and he had to struggle hard to maintain his composure. 'So what do you plan to do now?'

'I don't know.' The woman folded her arms around herself and her voice became shrill and threatening again. 'I just don't know. We were supposed to just come here, find the letter and feck off again. But now you've bugged it all up. Why did you have to stick your big fat nose into it? If you'd just minded your own business none of this would have happened.'

'But we...'

The slap shook his head and caused him to cry out in surprise. 'What did...?'

'Shut up.' This time he managed to turn his head before the next slap connected, but it still stung. 'Just shut up. I need to think. I can't think. You've ruined everything. Now there's going to be consequences. This isn't looking good for you, Sgt Edge.'

Chapter 26

Eamon Foley knew he'd gone too far when the road became so steep he had to get off the bike and push it. He guessed he'd gone past the house he was looking for, but that was probably because he went the wrong way at the junction about a mile back. There was a web of tracks tapering off in all directions. Some of them looked more worn than others so he took the one he thought most likely to lead to a pig farm. He was wrong.

Just off the road on his right, he noticed a young girl in the front yard of a small cottage. Hens pecked happily at something on the ground around her feet and a dog was stretched out in a patch of sunlight by the door. Foley took off his cap and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

'Hello,' he gave a cheery wave and propped the bike against an apple tree. 'Would your mammy be at home, by any chance?'

The girl stood perfectly still as Foley approached, staring at him from behind long straggly hair. She was about six years old. As he got closer the dog's ears shot up and its tail wagged as it shook itself out of its doze and stood up.

The girl still didn't move, her huge eyes unblinking, but as Foley got closer the dog decided it should bark. Foley stopped.

'Look, I'm Guard Foley. Can you call your mammy for me? I want to ask her something.'

A woman sauntered around the corner of the house carrying a big laundry basket, and when she saw Foley she spun around and started shouting. 'Brendan, the guards are here. The guards are here. C'mon, quick.' Then she rushed over and put her arm around the child.

'Come on in,' she said to Foley as she steered the child back into the house. She wasn't much older than Foley but years of hardship had mapped her face with lines. Her hair was long and matted like the little girl and her dress was frayed and covered in patches. She had nothing on her feet. 'Will you have a cup of tea? It's no trouble. There's a pot on the go already.'

'No,' Foley put his hand up. 'I won't, but thanks all the same. I only wanted to ask you...'

'Hello, Guard. I'm Brendan Galvin.' The man coming around the corner was dressed in old dungarees and wellingtons, and he was carrying a spade which he leant against the wall. He held out his hand and Foley shook it. 'Thank you for coming.'

Foley took a step back but before he could speak the man clapped his hands and shouted back over his shoulder. 'Thomas, will you come on. The guard is waiting.'

A young man skidded around from the back of the house followed by a teenage boy, and they nodded to Foley.

'This is my oldest son, Tommy,' Brendan said with pride. 'And his brother Noel. You met my wife Mary, haven't you? C'mon into the house.'

Foley hesitated. There was some sort of confusion here, but he didn't know how to correct it without appearing more foolish than he already felt. He had no choice but to bluff his way through it.

The tiny kitchen was dark and reeked of turf smoke, and the five of them stood around the table watching Foley as he followed them inside. 'Look, the reason I...I hope this isn't awkward for you...the thing is, I only called here to ask...'

The woman's face creased in disappointment and she covered her eyes with her hand. 'Don't tell us. You didn't catch them, did you?'

'I'm sorry? Who are...?'

The man put his arm around her and drew her to him. 'Well we didn't expect them to, did we? If we're really honest?' Bitterness dripped from his words. He waved Foley away. 'We're sorry to have bothered you, Guard. Will you see yourself out?'

Foley put his hand out. 'Look, I'm sorry about this, but do you think you could go through the details again for me?' He flicked his notebook open and pretended to be checking something on a page.

'Thomas?' The man looked over at his son who took a step back behind his mother.

‘But I told you everything when I went down to the barracks. They wrote it all down. Surely they told you what I said. Why have I got to tell you again?’ Thomas was in his early twenties but he had the face of a teenager, smooth and tanned. His eyes were a startling blue.

‘It’s just routine, Thomas,’ Foley told him. ‘People often remember stuff they hadn’t noticed at the time they made their statement. It happens all the time. So if you can go through it all from the beginning it might trigger something important.’

Thomas glanced at his father and nodded but he still didn’t look convinced. ‘Well, I was coming along the top road when some fellas robbed me. They took all my money off me.’

‘And this was when?’

‘Monday. I was in town at the fair. I sold our ram and a couple of sheep. I was coming home when I noticed two fellas standing by the hedge looking shifty. You know, pretending to be just hanging around? Anyway, as I went past them they jumped out on me and I took off like a greyhound. But there was another two waiting around the bend with big sticks. One of them clicked his fingers and held out his hand.’ Thomas bowed his head. ‘I had no choice. I gave them the money.’

Foley glanced up from his notebook. ‘That was the right thing to do, Thomas. No one wanted you to get hurt. There’s no sense in putting up a fight for the sake of a few pounds.’

‘I should have, though, shouldn’t I? They took everything I had.’ His eyes glistened with tears. ‘I should have stuck up for myself, tried to fight my way out. But I just rolled over like a beaten pup. Now, look at us. I should have at least tried to save our money.’

He turned away and his mother wrapped her arms around him. ‘No, no, Thomas. The guard is right. You can’t blame yourself for that. We would rather you came home in one piece. God knows what they would have done to you if you stood up to them.’

Foley continued to write in his notebook. ‘Was there much money involved?’

‘Every penny we had,’ Brendan snorted, waving his hand around the kitchen in frustration. ‘The ram was our last hope. Now we can’t pay the landlord. Again! So everything we’ve worked for all these years has turned to dust. By the end of the month, we’ll be homeless and living on the streets.’

‘Don’t say that, Brendan. Please. I’m sure when we explain what happened to Mr Kavanagh he’ll give us more time. Mr Kavanagh is the agent,’ she told Foley. ‘If the guards will write a letter for us to explain what happened maybe he’ll...’

‘Ah, it’s no use, Mary.’ Brendan stepped away from her and pulled a pipe from his pocket. He stuck it in his mouth, picked up a smouldering bit of turf with tongs and lit it, blowing out puffs of smoke as he drew on it.

Foley tapped the notebook with his pencil. ‘Is it that bad?’

Brendan nodded. He went back to his wife and slipped a hand around her waist. ‘Mary hasn’t been well for a few years now. She went into hospital for a big operation and she has to take loads of medicines every day. She tries her best to help out but she just hasn’t got the strength most days.’ He took a long drag of the pipe. ‘And I’m afraid I made a lot of bad decisions trying to find shortcuts. I didn’t rotate the crops properly. I thought one year wouldn’t make a great difference. But it did. Hardly anything grew, and what did was so useless we couldn’t give it away.’

The only thing that was performing properly was the ram. He was the last thing we wanted to sell, but we had no choice. Our time was up. We needed the cash. Now we're in a boat with a huge hole in it and we're going to sink without trace. God help us all.'

Mary wiped her eyes with her apron. 'But it won't be long now before I'm well again. If you ask for a little more time, just a few more months.'

Brendan dismissed it with an exaggerated wave of the pipe. 'It's too late, Mary. And you know it. So we might as well start packing up our miserable belongings right now.'

Foley turned to Thomas who was biting his fingernail. 'Did you manage to get a good look at the fellas who attacked you, Thomas?'

Thomas shrugged. 'I'm not sure. I saw them all right but my whole body was telling me not to catch their eye and to just get out of there. So all I can remember is they were all wearing long coats and big hats. They all looked the same to me.'

'So you wouldn't recognize any of them if you saw them again?'

'I don't know. One of them had a big round face and he spoke funny. You know, like his tongue was too big for his mouth.'

'So he spoke to you? What kind of accent did he have? Do you think he was local?'

'He didn't speak to me. I heard him telling the others that I was the wrong fella. He was agitated about them stopping me, but they sniggered at him and pushed him away.'

'Oh? Do you think he recognised you? Maybe he knew you or your Da from somewhere.'

Thomas squeezed his eyes as he tried to remember. 'No. At least I don't think he did. I certainly didn't know him.'

Foley nodded and scribbled in his notebook. 'So what happened next?'

'I ran back to town and reported it to the guards. The guard on the desk took my details but he didn't seem too interested. He implied the gang would be miles away by now, but they would send someone out anyway when they could.'

'He's right about that, I'm afraid,' Foley agreed. 'People like that tend to move from place to place, always keeping one step ahead of the law. They don't usually hang around for long.'

'These fellas did, though.'

'What do you mean?'

Thomas looked at his father. 'Well, as I was coming back I noticed them again. I came back by the bottom road because I was worried they might still be hanging about and as I came along by the river I saw someone in the trees close to where Jacob Butts lives.'

Foley stood up straight. 'Jacob Butts?'

'Yeah, he has a pig farm over by the river bank.'

'How far away is that?'

'Just across the field behind us,' Brendan said from behind a cloud of pipe smoke.

Foley nodded at Thomas to continue. 'Well, I recognised the long coat and big hat but I could only see one of them and he looked like he was watching something. I was afraid to go on in case the rest of them were nearby and would

see me so I hid behind some bushes and waited. Then I spotted the others. They were spread out as if they were waiting for something. Anyway, after a while, they all joined up and walked off in a bunch towards the river. I thought they were going to the house where Jacob Butts lives. I was worried because they looked as if they were on a mission.'

'Are you saying they went into Jacob Butt's house?'

'I don't know. But that's where the river bends. If they went straight on they'd have to cross an open field and I would have seen them. And if they came back the other way they would have had to pass by me.'

Foley waited but Thomas was lost in his thoughts. 'So what happened next, Thomas?'

'Well, I waited. I wanted to see where they were going. If I could find out where they were holding up I could go and get the guards. So I waited for them to re-appear and I was going to follow them.'

'So when they came back out...'

'They didn't. I waited well over an hour but I didn't hear anything except the pigs screeching. And I didn't see anything either. So I came home and told my Da what happened.'

Mary grabbed his arm again. 'We were sick with worry when he was late coming home. We thought maybe he couldn't sell the animals and was hanging around for a last-minute buyer who would rob him blind. But we didn't expect this.'

Brendan poked the fire with his boot. 'When the lad told us what happened I got my neighbour Ted and his sons and we went over to the Butts' house. But the drawbridge was up and he wouldn't answer us. So one of the young fellas climbed down the bank and went in the back way.' Brendan shrugged. 'Nothing. Butts said the drawbridge...'

'Sorry?' Foley put up his hand. 'The drawbridge?'

Brendan looked at the others and wagged the pipe. 'It's hard to explain. His house is built on the river bed and is set back about ten feet from the bank. He has a small bridge that he pulls up from the inside so no one can reach the front door. When it's up you can't even knock on the door. We used a long branch that we found nearby and hammered the wall with it. But if he heard us he ignored us.'

'So the drawbridge was up the whole time?'

'Well, it certainly was when we got there. But that's not to say it wasn't down earlier when those men went there. The young fella who went down the bank found Butts working in the pigsty. He nearly jumped out of his skin because no one ever comes in that way. It's a desperate climb down that bank, almost like a cliff face. But the young fella said Butts seemed genuine. When he calmed down he showed the lad around the house. There was no one there. He lowered the bridge to let him out the front door, but he didn't wait to answer our questions before he slammed the door shut and pulled it back up again.'

'So there was no sign of the men having ever been there?'

Thomas sucked in a sob. 'I know what you're all thinking.'

Foley was surprised at the darkness in the lad's face.

'You're thinking I made it all up, aren't you. I could see it in the face of the guard down in the barracks too. He was all right at first but as soon as I said there was four of them he smirked as if to say I was making it all up. Maybe there was a

robbery, I could see him thinking. But to say there was four of them was a bit of an exaggeration to cover up the fact that I let someone take my money and I didn't even put up a fight. You're all thinking the same. You're thinking I was probably robbed by some auld fella with a stick and I didn't have the guts to stand up to him. Or maybe there wasn't a robbery at all. Maybe I gave the ram away for a few pennies and I was too embarrassed to admit it.'

'Tom, stop it.' His mother tried to hug him but he shrugged her away and ran out the door.

Foley put his cap back on. 'I'll go over and have a word with Mr Butts. But I will be back to let you know how I get on.'

Chapter 27

The person standing by the pony and cart looked like a child, lifting sacks of stuff that were almost as big as he was. When he glanced around and saw a guard on a bike coming across the field he jumped back like a startled rabbit and threw himself behind the cart.

Foley swallowed a laugh as he pulled up, got off the bike and propped it against the wheel of the cart. 'Excuse me, I'm looking for Jacob Butts.'

'It wasn't me.' The voice was high and anxious.

'What?' As Foley walked around the back of the cart the figure shot around to the front and rolled under the pony's belly.

'Are you Jacob Butts?'

'I don't know anything about it. It wasn't me.'

Foley turned around the other way but the figure darted back under the pony again. After doing this another three times Foley's patience evaporated. 'Stand still,' he roared in the voice he used for crowd control. 'I want to talk to you.'

The head that poked above the side of the cart seemed to be all eyes and Foley was relieved that he was much older than he first thought.

'Are you Jacob Butts?'

The head nodded.

'Right, I'm Guard Foley. I want to ask you about...'

'They attacked me. They came into my house and attacked me.'

'Who did?'

Butts pointed across the field. 'Them in that house over there. He came here with his boys.'

'And why would they do that, Mr Butts?'

'They said I was hiding some men in my house. They forced their way in but they didn't find any men in there. They swore at me and threatened me with sticks.'

Foley stepped back and looked up at the house. It was exactly as Brendan Galvin described it. Just the top floor was visible above the bank and there was a wide gap between it and the front door. The only way to reach the door was across a small wooden bridge.

Butts was still talking, his head bobbing about like a loose balloon. 'They turned up here roaring and screaming saying they knew I was hiding some men they were looking for. They were hammering on my door with lumps of wood and threatening to break it down.'

'How did they reach the door?'

'What?'

'According to Brendan Galvin, they couldn't reach the door because that bridge wasn't down. So they couldn't have been banging on your door because they couldn't reach it, could they, Mr Butts? Can you explain how they were banging on your door?'

'I don't know. I can't remember. I was frightened.'

'They also said one of them climbed down the bank and met you at the bottom. In the pigsty. Isn't that what happened?'

Butts turned in a complete circle and flapped his arms. 'I don't know. I can't remember.'

'So did you see the men they were looking for?'

'I did not. How would I see them if they didn't come here? No one ever comes here.'

'They were seen heading this way. Then they disappeared off the face of the earth. So where did they go?'

'How should I know? They didn't come here, that's for sure. You said yourself the bridge wasn't down so how would they get into my house? It's all lies. I don't even know who those men were so why would they be coming here?'

Foley wiped his forehead. He desperately wanted a cigarette but he only had one left and he didn't want to share it. 'So you're telling me the men who attacked Brendan Galvin's son didn't come here?'

'They did not. I told you already. Why would they come here? I don't know them so why would they be coming here? And I didn't know anyone was attacked. No one said anyone was attacked. Look, why don't you come inside and see for yourself if you don't believe me.'

The look on Butts' face said if he could persuade an officer of the law then everyone else would have to believe him. He ran over the bridge and held the door open.

Foley had a sudden shiver of impatience. The day was slipping away from him. Guard Tom Mitchell was out on a home visit when Foley called at the guard's house on the way up here, so Foley hadn't briefed him on the Viktor Marks case. So he'd have to call in on the way back to town. But Butts was looking more like a child again, anxious to please the teacher. Foley felt an odd sympathy for him. He straightened his cap and crossed the bridge.

Just inside the door, stairs led down to the floor below. The only thing stopping you from falling down the gap was a thin bannister. There was another opening directly below the stairs through which Foley could see pigs moving around, and the smell that wafted up from them was so pungent Foley had to put his hand over his mouth. He felt queasy as he shuffled around the bannister and followed Butts into the dark room. The only light coming in was from two small windows at the back, and the bare stone walls were thick with dust. The only furniture appeared to be a huge armchair near an open fireplace, a table shoved back

against the wall and a narrow bed under the windows. There was a statue of the Virgin Mary and a line of half-melted candles along the mantelpiece.

‘See,’ Butts said breathlessly. ‘There’s no one here. Didn’t I tell you?’ He shot across to the stairs. ‘Come down here and take a look in the store room. C’mon. Have a look down here and see for yourself.’

Foley went to the edge of the stairs and gagged again. ‘No. It’s all right. I’ll take your word for it.’

When Foley looked back up Butts was gripping a lever at the side of the stairs, and his face seemed to have changed shape. His eyes were enormous and unfocussed. And in the dim light, his face looked purple. ‘But I want you to see for yourself.’ The voice was suddenly deeper. ‘I want you to tell those other fellas there’s no one in my house. I want you to make sure...’

The hairs on the back of Foley’s neck bristled and he jumped back away from the stairs. He had a mad impulse to turn and run, but he swallowed it down.

‘Mr Butts, I believe you.’ He stopped his hands from shaking by pulling out his notebook. ‘But I have to tell you the real reason I came here is to ask you about a pig you sold to Jackie Maher earlier this year.’

Butt’s face creased and he let go of the lever. ‘That wasn’t me. That was my father.’

‘Your father? Right. So is he here?’

‘He’s not.’

‘Then where is he?’

‘He’s dead.’

Foley studied the face for a moment but in the poor light, he couldn’t read it. ‘I’m very sorry for your loss. When did he die?’

‘November. Maybe December. I’m not sure.’

‘Really? You can’t remember when your father died?’

‘I can’t. There’s loads of things I can’t remember.’ Butts tapped the side of his head. ‘It’s not my fault. I just forget things.’

‘All right. I’m sorry. But you do remember that it was last year? Before Christmas, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘So he couldn’t have sold the pig to Jackie Maher in February. Because he was already dead.’

‘I don’t... well, it wasn’t me.’

Foley made a big show of flicking through his notebook, mainly to give himself time for his heart to stop racing. ‘Well, this invoice I have here says Jackie Maher bought a pig from a Jacob Butts in February. You’re Jacob Butts, aren’t you? The invoice has your signature on it, hasn’t it?’

Butts’ head was shaking so much now he had to grab the bannister to stop himself from falling. ‘I don’t remember. I told you, I...’

Foley took the ring from his pocket and held it out. ‘Have you seen this ring before?’

‘No.’ The answer was too quick, eyes darting everywhere except on the ring.

Foley almost shoved it into his face. ‘Look at it, Mr Butts.’

Reluctantly Butts leant closer but he didn’t touch it. ‘I never saw that before.’

‘Well this ring was found inside the pig you sold to Jackie Maher. How would you explain that?’

Butts made a funny choking sound and his head shook vigorously again. ‘I don’t know. How would I know? That pig could have swallowed it anywhere. It must have been in the feed.’

‘How would it get in the feed? You gave him the feed.’

‘I gave him the feed. I didn’t make the feed. We get the feed from lots of different places in town. Hotels, butcher shops, anyone with swill to sell. We get a delivery nearly every day. We don’t know what’s in it. All we care about is if the pigs can eat it. And if it makes them fat.’

Butts put his hand back on the lever and for a moment he appeared to be caressing it. His eyes were unfocussed again and he licked his lips. ‘But there’s still some of the feed left down in the storeroom. Why don’t you go down and have a look yourself? See what it’s made from. Go on. You’re a guard. You should go down and see it for yourself. Why don’t you go on down and...?’

Foley snapped the notebook shut and shoved it back in his pocket. He needed to get out of this place with its nauseating smell and strange, almost sinister atmosphere. He knew the Super was already fractious about what happened to Mixer Daly’s son and Foley’s feeble report was going to antagonize him even more. But facing the Super was far less daunting than staying here for one moment longer.

Chapter 28

There was a time when Liam Edge prided himself on his bladder control. He could go almost a whole day without needing a toilet. It was all part of the job. And it helped him to stay focused. But now as he got older it was a different story. Being stuck in an office all day didn’t help either. There was no need to hold it in anymore so the practice slowly died. These days he rarely gave it a second thought.

So now he wasn’t just aching with cramp in his legs and arms. He was also wet and reeking of urine.

He’d lost control of time as well. He had no idea how long he’d been in here. The light outside the window didn’t appear to have changed at all.

Someone did come in the front door and stomp up the stairs but that was ages ago. Muffled voices drifted down to him, soft at first but suddenly loud and violent. There was a lot of thumping and the odd crash. Then it stopped, apart from the creaking of something that sounded like bed springs.

Now it had started up again, fierce shouting and screaming. Footsteps clattering down the stairs. Suddenly the door flew open and the woman was shoved into the room so hard she fell and hit her face on Edge’s knee. The shadow outside the door moved away and Edge could hear the footsteps go away down the hall.

The woman staggered to her feet and wiped the blood from her nose with her sleeve. Then she spat some out on the floor.

'Right, this is what we're going to do.' She started pulling at the cord around Edge's wrists. 'We're going back to your house and we're going to go right through the place inch by inch until we find that feckin' letter. Do you understand me?'

Edge groaned as he rubbed some life back into his bruised wrists. When she freed his legs he stood up very carefully and he had to grip the back of the chair to steady himself.

'Look, this madness has to stop.' His mouth was so dry he found it hard to form the words. 'I've already searched the two rooms. Both of them. Cassidy's and Mike what's-his-name. There's nothing...'

'Don't call her Cassidy,' the woman screamed, spraying Edge with red spittle. 'I told you already. I am Cassidy. So shut up and move yourself. C'mon. Shift. Get going. We haven't got much time.' She grabbed a lump of his jacket and started dragging him towards the door.

'This is madness,' Edge protested again, stopping her dead. 'How do you think you'll get away with this? Do you think I'm just going to walk through the town and act like nothing's happening? I'll have you arrested the moment you step outside the door.'

The woman put both hands over her face and gave what was either a laugh or a sob. 'You won't arrest me, Sgt Edge. Not if you want to see your grandson again.'

Edge staggered back against the chair. 'What have you done to him?'

'For God's sake. And you call yourself copper? Do you think we'd tell you that?' She stabbed a finger into his chest. 'But I'm telling you this, if you try anything funny, if you even look at me sideways, the next time you see the boy will be when bits of him arrive in the post. And the same goes for finding that letter. If I'm not back here in two hours clutching it in my fist the next parcel you receive will be his head in a box. Do I make myself clear, Sgt Edge? Now stop wasting time.'

'It's not going to work.' Edge shook her away from him. 'I'm supposed to be in court today. They'll be out looking for me. If they see me they'll want to know what's going on.'

The woman spat more blood on the floor as she rushed out of the room. She was back in an instant and threw a dirty old raincoat at him. 'Put that on. Quickly. We have to go.'

Even after taking off his uniform jacket, the coat was a tight fit and Edge had to strain to move his arms. 'This is stupid. I look like a stuffed scarecrow in this.'

'Just go.' The woman pushed him from behind, right out of the door.

'Yes?' Vicky was wiping her hands in her apron as she answered the knock on the door. She looked from the big man in the dirty overcoat to the woman with the bruised face, then back to the man again.

'Vicky...' Edge pushed past her and went straight into the kitchen and the woman followed. It took Vicky a few moments to shut the door and shuffle in behind them.

'Vicky, I'm so sorry to barge in on you like this but I need a huge favour from you. Will you do something for me? Please?'

Vicky's face had drained and her eyes had fear in them. 'Yes. Of course. What...?'

‘I need you to leave us alone for a couple of hours. I can’t tell you why right now but it is police business. And it’s best if you’re not involved. So if you can just go out for a couple of hours. Please?’

Vicky glared at the woman, the look on her face full of questions. ‘Where will I go?’

Edge put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. ‘Just go into town, do a bit of shopping. Just for a couple of hours, that’s all. I promise you we’ll be gone when you get back.’

Vicky still wasn’t sure. The whole thing threw her into a panic. She wanted to argue but she turned and went into the hall instead, got her coat and hat and went out pulling the door shut behind her.

‘I’ve already searched Eamon’s room,’ Edge said as Vicky passed the window. ‘The one that Cassidy... or whatever her name was... used to live in. There’s nothing hidden there.’

The woman’s eyes flashed and she barged past him. ‘Do it again. This time, find something. Find the feckin letter, Sgt Edge, or you know what’ll happen.’

An hour later they were back in the kitchen. The woman was slumped on a chair. She seemed to have shrunk, her shoulders hunched and her arms holding herself in a distressed hug. Dirt streaked her face and her fingers were bleeding from the desperate effort of pulling up floorboards and tearing the backs off cupboards.

‘We’re dead,’ she sobbed. ‘We’re all feckin dead.’

Suddenly she jumped up, ran to the sink and got sick, groaning loudly between retches. Edge paced up and down like a cornered rat. He was struggling to control the panic that was bubbling up inside him. Part of him wanted to punch the woman, knock her out and go back to the house to find her partner. Edge would make him say where Joe Jnr was. He’d beat it out of him. But from experience, he knew stuff like that often went badly wrong. No, it was better to stay with the woman, work on her, get her on his side.

The woman eventually splashed cold water on her face and sat back down at the table. Edge pulled the cork out of the half bottle of whisky he’d brought downstairs with him, poured some into two mugs and handed one to the woman. She grabbed it as if she was going to throw it back at him, but then she squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed it down in one gulp. And she gasped out loud as she slammed the mug back down on the table.

Edge swallowed his drink in one gulp as well. ‘So are you going to tell me what’s so important about this letter that we’re all going to die because of it?’

The woman’s eyes were wet as she glared back at him and she bared her teeth in an angry snarl. ‘I wouldn’t tell you the time of day, you auld shite.’

‘I don’t care about the time of day,’ Edge snapped. ‘But if I’m going to die I’d like the courtesy of knowing why. What’s in that letter that I... that we should die for?’

‘Deeds, if you must know.’ The whisky and the stress hit her suddenly and she had to shake her head to focus on the inspector. ‘Not that it matters now.’

‘Deeds? What kind of deeds?’

‘Deeds to a house.’

Edge poured more whisky into his mug and handed the bottle to the woman. 'Are you telling me all this is about deeds to a house? What kind of house is worth getting killed over?'

'A big house.' The woman burped and covered her mouth with her fist. 'A mansion. In the middle of Dublin.'

'And what? Did you inherit it or something?'

She took a swig straight from the bottle and swished it around her mouth before waving the bottle at him. 'No. Seamus won it. Playing cards. He won it in a game of cards.'

'My good God...'

'That's what he does,' the woman snapped before Edge could say anything else. 'He's a professional card player. He plays cards for a living. And he's bloody good at it. He's worked in all the top clubs in the country.'

Edge pulled out a chair and sat at the table. 'Are you saying someone bet their house in a game of cards? Jasus, they must have been desperate to do that.'

'No. Just plain arrogant. Showing off to his posh friends.'

'Naw.' Edge got a cigarette from a drawer and lit it with a lump of turf from the range. Then he sat back down with a groan. 'He'd have to be very sure of his hand to risk something like that. His house? I mean, how arrogant was he?'

'Oh, he is extremely arrogant. A pig of a man called Rupert D'Lacey. You've probably heard of him. Daddy is stinking rich so naturally, he's high up in the government. And naturally, the son was spoilt rotten and thinks he's entitled to do whatever he pleases. So he didn't think for one moment anyone would call his bluff. People rarely stand up to him. He's such an obnoxious pig they're terrified to defy him so they fold at the first opportunity.'

'I don't get it. If he's so rich why in God's name would he need to put his house up as a stake?'

'Because he was losing and he couldn't stand it. Rupert doesn't like to lose.'

'But I still don't understand why he would...'

'Look, at the time Seamus didn't know Rupert D'Lacey. He'd heard of him, of course. Everyone in Dublin heard of the D'Laceys. But Seamus hadn't come across Rupert before so he didn't know what an almighty bad loser he was. And he also didn't know that Rupert's father was so fed up with his son's antics he instructed every club in Ireland to limit his credit. Anyway, Seamus was having one of the luckiest nights of his life. And he was so absorbed in the game he didn't notice that the more Rupert lost the more obnoxious he became. And when his limit was reached Rupert had no choice but to quit. Which he did not like one little bit. So he hurled abuse at everyone and stormed out.'

The woman burped again and licked her lips. 'Anyway, a few hours later he was back and he threw the deeds to the family mansion on the table. Some of the players were solicitors and they verified them as authentic.'

'Good God. Didn't anyone try to stop him? What were his friends doing?'

'Of course, they tried to stop him. Loads of people tried to talk him out of it. But he's such a horrible man they only ever made token noises. Most of them knew if they got on the wrong side of Rupert D'Lacey they could kiss goodbye to their careers.'

Edge raised his cup. 'So the game didn't go Rupert's way, I assume.'

'No, it did not. And Seamus was never one for rolling over. Even after everyone else had thrown their hands in he refused to be intimidated. He had the cards. So he called Rupert's bluff. And as you can imagine Rupert went into a rage. He promised all kinds of retribution on Seamus. But Seamus took the deeds and brought them around to me. And he told me to mind them until the dust settled.'

'So what was Seamus going to do with them? Surely he didn't think...'

'Oh, he knew he couldn't keep them.' She waved the idea away. 'There was no way he could go up against the D'Laceys. Anyway, how could he afford to run a house like that? No, he was just doing it to annoy Rupert. He intended to take them straight around to the father and offer them back for a reasonable fee.'

The shudder she gave caused the mug on the table to rattle.

'But when I woke up the next morning the deeds were gone. That evil little cow Mary O'Mara had stolen them.'

Edge waited as she took another swig from the bottle. Her face was red and her eyes even redder.

'I thought Seamus was going to faint when I told him. I've never seen a man so frightened in my whole life. He said a couple of men had already approached him and advised him to think carefully about what he was going to do next. It was a threat and it panicked him completely.'

'Can I ask you, who exactly is Seamus?'

'He's my husband.'

'Oh. Right. So how come you don't... well, I get the impression you weren't living in the same place when all this was going on. Or am I wrong?'

The woman pulled a face and gave a deep growl as if she was going to shout at him again, but she sighed instead. 'No, you're not wrong. I told you I was a maid in a large house near Dublin. So I lived in. Seamus had to follow the game wherever it took him so he used the local boarding houses. It worked out all right.'

Edge nodded and took a long drag of the cigarette. She caught the expression on his face and slammed her hand on the table.

'What's that feckin look for? I know what you're thinking. You're thinking he was living the life of a bachelor while I... Why do you men always think like that?'

Edge blew a stream of smoke down his nose. 'I'm not thinking anything of the sort.'

'Well don't. Seamus is a good man.'

'Of course, he is,' Edge snorted and she snapped up straight.

'He is. Seamus is a good man. He looks after me.'

Edge pointed at her face. 'So what is that? A gentle slap to show his affection? What kind of good man uses his wife as a punch-bag?'

'It wasn't like that. He panicked, that's all. He was terrified. He thought you were one of D'Lacey's men coming to get him.'

'I was in uniform,' Edge scoffed. 'How could he not know I was a police officer?'

'That doesn't mean a thing. D'Lacey has friends in high places. The whole family works for the government. They control everyone. They control the Gardaí. You could still be one of D'Lacey's men.'

A tear escaped and trickled down her cheek and she touched it gently. 'Seamus was never like that before he got involved with those stupid D'Laceys. He was

kind. He made me happy. He made a fuss of me. I would have walked on hot coals for that man.'

Her smile had a sadness in it as she recalled the memory. 'All right, I was young and stupid back then. I had a romantic notion of what married life was like. A nice home, nice children playing in a nice garden. I had no idea it was only in fairy tales that you got to live happily ever after.'

She held the whisky bottle up to the light and gave it a shake, but she didn't drink from it. 'I knew what he did for a living so I understood he had to go where the games were. I knew he'd be away for days at a time. But I thought we'd have a place of our own too. Even if it was just a room somewhere. How can you be married and not live together? But he kept putting it off, saying he needed to save up to buy us a decent house. He wanted to live in a leafy street in a leafy town where the children could grow up safe and healthy.'

This time she snorted and took a swig from the bottle of whisky. 'But where did he think the kids were going to come from if we were never together? There's only one Virgin Birth, you know?'

Edge swallowed his drink to cover the laugh that almost burst out.

'So I continued living in my little room, seeing my husband once a week on my day off.' She wiped away another tear. 'And that was fine. That was all right. I didn't mind. Then one day he came racing in as if he was wired to the moon. I thought he was drunk, he was so excited. He doesn't drink, of course. But he was certainly intoxicated that day. He'd won this big house in a game of cards. But I had a very bad feeling about it right from the start. And I was right.'

Now her voice was becoming more slurred and her eyes took a while to focus on Edge again. She let them close and her head drooped, and Edge thought she'd fallen asleep. He needed to keep her awake.

'So why do you think Cassidy... sorry, that girl... took the deeds? Do you think she was put up to it? Did someone tell her what to do?'

The woman straightened up and her eyes widened, then she sank back down again. 'No. I don't think so. I don't know. She was too stupid to pull off a stroke like that herself. Anyway, as far as I knew she'd come straight from the orphanage, just like I did. She wouldn't have had any contact with the outside world while she was at St Brendan's. So I'd say it was very unlikely.'

'You were brought up in an orphanage? I'm sorry, I didn't know that.'

'How would you?' she snapped. 'It's not stamped on my forehead.'

'No. You're right. I'm sorry. So you knew her already, from the orphanage?'

'No. I was a few years older.' She rested her head back against the wall behind her and sucked at her lips. 'They throw you out when you're sixteen, you know. They get you a job then you're on your own. They sent me to this big house in the country as domestic help. And I was so happy. I loved it. For the first time in my life, I had my own room, my own money, nobody nagging me all day long. As long as you did what they wanted they left you alone.'

'So whose house was it?'

She shrugged. 'I've no idea. I thought it was a private house at first, but it was run by a nun and man. And guests were always coming and going.'

'And you never asked? You were never curious?'

‘No, I never asked. I didn’t care. I was happy there. I didn’t care whose house it was.’

Edge nodded and sat back in his chair. ‘So how did you meet Seamus, if he was so elusive?’

‘I was in town and I dropped my glove. He picked it up. Then the next week he was there again. And I was flattered that he remembered me. It went on from there. Eighteen months later he proposed. And that’s my story in a nutshell. Right up until the dreadful day he met the stupid D’Lacey.’

Edge went over to the range and dropped his cigarette butt into it. ‘Do you want some tea?’

The woman nodded. ‘Perhaps it would have been all right if that evil little cow hadn’t turned up and I was forced to share my room with her. I was so disappointed. Five years I’d been there and not a single complaint against me. I worked hard, I was never late, I never took time off, and they did that to me. So naturally, I took an instant dislike to her with her big baby brown eyes and a smug smile. She thought because we shared an orphanage we shared a life. But I wasn’t having any of it. I never trusted her. She lied too easily. And I was right. Then one morning she was gone. And so was my purse. And the deeds.’

Edge filled the kettle and put it on the range, and he gave the turf a quick poke. The woman had to shake her head to keep her eyes from closing again.

‘Seamus believed she went to Dublin, you know. A big city where people could hide in plain sight. So we went there looking for her, but there was no trace of her. Eventually, our money began to run out and Seamus had no choice but to play cards again. But it was usually in back street dives where there was less chance of being recognized.’

‘And the deeds never surfaced? No one tried to cash them in?’

‘No. As far as we know D’Lacey is still furious about it. He put a bounty on Seamus, you know? Can you imagine that? A bounty.’

‘So what have you been doing since then? What is it, three years?’

‘To tell you the truth, I don’t know. It’s all a blur. We wandered like gipsies, going from place to place hoping we’d come across her eventually. Then a few weeks ago we met a fella in a pub. Mike Collins, from Tralee. He started maudlin about how he once knew a girl called Alex, and how she was taken from him. Alex Cassidy, he said. He was besotted with her and he kept describing her, the long black hair, the beautiful brown eyes, the way she spoke. She was a handsome lass, he said. Which was an expression I remembered her using when she was in my room. A handsome lass. And then I had no doubt. Now we knew where she’d gone and where she’d been living all this time. Unfortunately, according to him, she was dead.’

She gave a sinister groan and pointed the bottle at Edge. ‘He mentioned you a lot too, Sgt Edge. He mentioned your obsession with her, your jealous rage when she rejected you. And his theory about what you did to her. How you buried her over in the graveyard where no one would even look for her.’

Edge felt a sharp pain ripple through his chest and he had to hug himself to ease it. ‘That is such a load of bullshit. That girl went home. Back to wherever she came from. Don’t you think if she lied about who she was she’d lie about

everything else? How could he believe a word she said? He was obsessed with her, not me.'

'Stop it.' The woman jumped up and sent her chair flying. 'I don't give a shit. Do you hear me? I don't care what you did. All I care about is what we're going to do now. D'Lacey wants his deeds back and he is not going to stop until he has them in his fat little hand. As long as he believes Seamus has them he'll keep on looking for us. And when he eventually catches up with us do you think he'll believe us when we tell him we don't have them? He'll strip our skin from our bones and feed it to his dogs while we watch.'

She shot over to the sink and splashed more cold water on her face.

'So what are we going to do now, Sgt Edge? Tell me. What are we going to do now?'

Chapter 29

Guard Tom Mitchell still hadn't returned when Foley called at the guard's house on his way back through Blennerville. He waited for half an hour and had a cup of tea with Mitchell's wife, but he was anxious to get back to Tralee and report to Sgt Fitzgerald. With a bit of luck, the Sgt would pass the Jacob Butts case on to the detectives and Foley wouldn't have to worry about it anymore.

The door to Carmady's pub was open as Foley cycled by and he could see shadows moving about inside. And he was so engrossed in trying to catch a glimpse of Eleanor that he didn't see the man step into the road in front of him. At the last moment, the shape with its hands up filled his vision and he grabbed the brakes. He wobbled and clipped the kerb, missing the man by the width of a cigarette paper.

'I'm sorry, guard,' the man said, still holding both hands up. 'But I wanted to have a word with you.'

Foley straightened the bike and sat up, adjusted his cap and tried not to curse. 'You could have got yourself killed, you eejit.'

'I know. I know. And I'm sorry.' The overalls the man was wearing were frayed and too big for his long skinny body. He was probably still in his thirties but the grimy skin and unshaven face made him look much older. 'I was hoping to catch you because there's something I remembered about the night that young fella was killed here.'

'Oh, right. But I'm afraid the man you need to talk to is Guard Mitchell. He's the local guard. I'm only visiting from Tralee so...'

'Well, it's because of you that I remembered it.' The man wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'When I saw you talking to the Carmady girl on the bridge earlier it popped into my mind. So when I saw you coming back along the road just now I thought I'd better talk to you about it first. Now I'm not sure what you'll make of it, but if you think it's important then I'll go over to see Tom Mitchell, as you said.'

Foley glanced back at the pub. 'What's it got to do with the Carmady girl?'

'Well, it was the dress, you see.'

'What do you mean?'

The man glanced around nervously. 'Look, I don't want to get anyone into trouble, you understand? I'm not one for idle gossip.'

'Of course not, Mr...?' Foley sucked back his impatience.

'Montague. John Montague.' He held out his hand and Foley shook it. 'I live over there on the far side of the canal. The second house along.'

Foley looked at where he was pointing and nodded. 'And what do you want to tell me, Mr Montague?'

'Ah, as you know the night the young fella died there was a lot of activity around here with the army trucks coming and going, engines and headlights, people shouting all through the night.'

'Yes. They thought they saw a submarine in the bay.'

'Well, they kept everyone awake wondering what was happening. The kids were up, the wife was terrified. There was no sleep for anyone that night and that's for sure. Anyway, I took my pipe outside and wandered over to the small bridge over the canal and I stood there listening to the goings-on. It was a clear night with a big moon and all the stars, but I didn't notice them until a lorry came along and the headlights picked them out. They were standing back in the shadows, you see? So I can only assume they were trying to hide from me. I got a bit of a fright when they appeared in the light, I can tell you.'

Foley waited as Montague paused for effect, then he sighed. 'So who was it?'

'Well, as I said, it was the dress I noticed. I only saw it from the back but it was the same dress she was wearing when you were talking to her today. You couldn't mistake it. It's a very pretty dress, wouldn't you say, guard?'

'Are you telling me it was Eleanor Carmady?'

'It was. I'm sure of it.'

'So who was she with?'

'The lad who was killed.'

Foley felt a shiver through his whole body. 'Are you certain?'

'I am. The lad looked straight at me. He turned away immediately, of course, but I knew him from the pub. You have to understand, it was only for a moment when the headlights caught them. But there was no mistaking the dress and the ginger hair. And the lad's face.'

'So what happened then? Where did they go?'

'I don't know. I went back home. Well, I was a bit embarrassed. I didn't want them to think I was some sort of Peeping Tom spying on their courting.'

'So you didn't see where they went after that?'

'No. As I said, I was a bit embarrassed. For them and myself.'

'And what time was that?'

'I don't know for sure. But it was well after midnight.'

'And you didn't think to tell Guard Mitchell all this before now?' It came out harsher than Foley intended and Montague's face hardened.

'Well, as I said, it skipped my mind. I was back up for work at six o'clock and there was so much going on I completely forgot about it. I was more concerned about a feckin' submarine in the sea to worry about a couple of love birds doing whatever it is they call it these days.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Montague. Yes, you're right.' Foley looked back at the pub as he took his notebook out of his jacket pocket. When he started to write in it Montague shifted his feet and pointed back at the docks.

'Look, guard. I have to be getting back to work. I'm sorry to have troubled you. I thought it might be important, but if you think I'm wrong...'

'No. Not at all.' Foley shut the notebook and held out his hand. 'You did the right thing, Mr Montague. Thank you. We appreciate every little bit of help we can get. And I'll pass it on to Guard Mitchell right away. I'm sure he'll follow it up.'

Montague nodded and just as he was about to walk away he rubbed his nose in his sleeve again. 'There was something that bothered me at the time, though.' He pulled a face and shook his head. 'It's one of those annoying things that you can't put your finger on but it niggles away at you, you know what I mean? When I saw you with the girl today it almost surfaced again, and again just now while I was speaking to you. But it was gone again before I could focus on it. I'm sorry. If I remember it I'll send you a message.'

Foley watched him saunter back towards the dock as he shoved his notebook back into his top pocket. He knew he had no right to feel the way he did. His instincts were telling him to write it up and pass it to Guard Mitchell. It wasn't his concern anymore. But before he knew it he was leaning his bike against the pub wall and pushing the door open.

Eleanor was behind the bar and the smile she gave him only added to the confusion in his heart. 'Guard Eamon. To what do we owe the pleasure?'

Foley did a quick check of the bar. There were only two customers and they were in the corner by the window. They were elderly and in deep conversation.

'Is it alright if I ask you a few questions?'

'Oh, so this isn't a social call. And I was just going to pour you a nice long pint.'

Eleanor's eyes sparkled and Foley felt his face starting to burn. He sat on a stool and propped his elbows on the bar, and he struggled to find the right words while she was smiling at him like that. 'Look, I need to know exactly what happened on the night Viktor Marks was killed.'

Eleanor blinked a few times and her smile slipped. 'What do you mean, what happened?'

'I mean, I need to know exactly what happened to Viktor that night. The thing is, first you told me you didn't see him in here then you said he was in here. Then you said he left after one pint and you led me to believe you didn't see him again after that.'

'I didn't see him again after that.'

'Are you sure?'

This time her smile disappeared. 'What are you saying, Guard Eamon? Are you accusing me of something?'

Foley glanced around the bar again to avoid looking in her eyes. 'Look, I'm just after speaking to someone who says he saw you with Viktor on the bridge sometime after midnight on the night he was killed.'

This time Eleanor stepped back and the laugh she gave was sharp and angry. 'What?'

Foley nodded. 'That's what he said.'

‘How could... what in God’s name are you talking about? Who said... It’s not true. How could anyone have seen me when I never left the bar all night? That is total bullshit. I’m surprised at you, Guard Eamon. I really am. I thought...’

‘Look, I’m sorry if I upset you. But the man swears he saw you and Viktor. He recognized the dress you were wearing. It was the same one you had on this morning, which is why he remembered it. So what’s going on, Eleanor?’

Eleanor’s face had drained, making her freckles seem darker against her pale skin. ‘What’s going on is you’re out of your tiny mind if you believe that. Why in God’s name would I be on the bridge with Viktor in the first place? I told you already, I hardly knew him. Just because he came in here for a drink doesn’t mean I knew him, does it?’

‘Then why would someone say they saw you? Why would anyone make up a story like that?’

Eleanor’s arms flapped and her eyes sparkled with tears, but just as quickly her face hardened. ‘Anyway, how could I have left the pub? It was my Da’s night off so I was the only one here to look after the place. So how could I have gone out and left the place unattended?’

‘What about your brother?’

‘What about him?’

‘Was he here?’

‘Yes, he was here. He was in his room. But there’s no way on God’s earth I’d leave him in charge.’

‘But would he vouch for you? Would he swear you didn’t go out that night?’

Eleanor bowed her head and let her hair fall over her face. ‘No. He would not.’

One of the elderly customers shuffled over to the bar and banged his glass on the counter, giving Foley a dirty sideways glance. ‘Another pint there, Eleanor. And one for Pat as well.’

Eleanor pulled the two pints in silence and the customer was still glaring at Foley as he carried them back to the table. Eleanor took her time wiping her hands in a towel before coming back to Foley. She looked at him with cold eyes.

Foley took out a cigarette, lit it and blew out a long stream of smoke. ‘So your brother can’t say if you were here all night or not?’

Eleanor pushed an ash tray towards him.

‘No, he can’t,’ she snapped. Then she gave him a crooked grin. ‘But the lads from The Jenny Rover can.’

‘Who?’

‘The lads from The Jenny Rover.’ Again the smug grin. ‘They docked around ten o’clock and half the crew turned up here just on closing time. I locked the doors and we all moved into the back kitchen. They played cards, they had a few pints, and they left around half three. Or maybe four o’clock.’

Foley put his head in his hands. One of the elderly customers sneezed loudly and swore even louder, and Eleanor stood with her arms folded, not looking at anything.

‘So where is this ship now?’ was all Foley could think to say.

‘Gone back to Cork, I suppose. But the lads said they’ll be back in a few weeks. So if you feel you have to speak to them you can do it then.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’

‘Why would I? The subject never came up. Anyway, you’re a guard. What kind of eejit do you think I am that I’d tell a guard I had a lock-in?’

‘No, you’re right.’ Foley tried a smile but Eleanor ignored it. ‘I expect your father wouldn’t be happy if you did.’

‘Actually, he doesn’t know about it. And if you wouldn’t mind, I’d prefer if you didn’t tell him either.’

‘What?’ Foley laughed. ‘You had the crew of a ship here until four o’clock in the morning and your Da didn’t notice?’

‘I told you already. It was his night off. He was out.’

‘All night?’

‘Yes, all night.’ Eleanor rolled her eyes. ‘He’s a grown man. And I’m his daughter, not his mother. But if you want to know where he was why don’t you ask him yourself? He’s upstairs. Will I call him for you?’

‘No. You’re grand.’ Foley sat back on the stool. ‘Look, I’m sorry about all this. I just don’t understand why someone thought they saw you on the bridge.’

‘Well, they were mistaken.’

‘Yeah, they must have been. But he was adamant, though. He insisted he recognized your dress, the white one you had on this morning.’

‘That’s my best dress. It’s my only dress. I only wear it on Sunday and for special occasions. I wore it today because I went to see the bank manager. But there’s no way I would wear it if I was working behind the bar. You get filthy working behind the bar. I would never risk wearing my best dress if I was working. So your man is talking out the wrong hole if he’s saying he saw me.’

‘I expect he got confused about who he saw in the dark. I’m sorry I had to ask you about it. The thing is I’m supposed to hand everything I know over to Tom Mitchell. I just wanted to be sure about what I was going to tell him. I didn’t want to... well, you know?’

Eleanor picked up a glass and started wiping it with a towel, and Foley tried a big smile again. ‘Maybe I will have that pint after all.’

Eleanor held the glass up to the light before putting it on the shelf with the others. ‘I don’t think so, Guard Eamon. You’re on duty, I believe. So if there’s nothing else, shut the door on your way out.’

Chapter 30

Liam Edge pushed the woman back down in the chair and slapped his hand on the table. ‘I’ll tell you what we’re going to do, missus. We’re going back down to that house and face your husband. We’re going to tell him there’s no feckin letter in this house. We’ll make him hand over my grandson and then we’ll decide...’

‘No. That’s not going to work. He’ll...’

‘Listen,’ Edge barked. ‘We’ll make him understand the only way to sort this out is to let my grandson go. Then we’ll go to Dublin and talk to D’Lacey himself. We’ll tell him the truth. I’m an inspector in the Gardaí. If I go with you, D’Lacey will have to take notice.’

'No, no, no!' The woman tried to jump up but Edge stopped her, and she gave a throaty cry that caused tears to flicker in her eyes. 'I told you already, D'Lacey is a lunatic. We can't go back there. He won't listen to reason. The minute he gets his hands on us we'll be dead.'

'I don't believe that for one moment.' Edge stood back, conscious of a sharp pain in his chest that he tried to ease by straightening up. 'He won't do anything if I'm with you. He wouldn't dare.'

This time the noise the woman made was a splutter. 'My God, how naïve are you? I know you're just a thick country cop and you don't know anything about D'Lacey, but he's not scared of the Gardaí. He owns the Gardaí. The whole top layer of the Gardaí is related to him. Who do you think killed Tommy and put his mother in a wheelchair?'

Edge felt another sharp stab in his chest, but it was gone again in a moment. 'What are you talking about? Who's Tommy?'

'My husband's younger brother.'

'What happened to him?'

'They killed him.'

'Who did?'

'Your mob. I just told you. They beat him to death.'

'I don't... why would they... why would you even say that?'

The woman rubbed the tear away. 'Because I bloody well saw them. I was there.'

'Really?' Edge gave a lopsided grin. 'I still don't...'

'I was there.' The yell was as loud as a shot. 'I don't give a shit whether you believe me or not, all right? But I was there. When we discovered the envelope was gone we went straight to Dublin. Seamus had a friend there, Billy McStay. He knew everyone in the city. Seamus was sure he'd be able to find where that sneaky cow who robbed us was hiding. We stayed the night with Billy then went across town because Seamus wanted to see his mother. I waited around the corner while Seamus went into the house.' She glanced at the inspector who was still holding a disbelieving smirk on his face.

She rolled her eyes. 'His mother and I didn't see eye to eye, if you must know. It was better I waited outside. Anyway, when Seamus came back out he was very subdued and anxious, which was understandable, considering what was happening. Then when we were a couple of streets away Seamus realised he'd forgotten to pick up a wallet he kept in this bedroom drawer for emergencies. So we turned back.' She shivered and closed her eyes for a moment.

'When we reached the house the door was open and we could hear a terrible commotion going on in the kitchen. We saw two men attacking Tommy with their truncheons and his mother screaming as she tried to beat them off. They were looking for Seamus, warning Tommy he was in serious trouble if he didn't tell them where he was. One of them spotted us and shouted that they were detectives and were under arrest, but Seamus grabbed me and we bolted.'

She looked at Edge again for a response but he didn't give one. So she continued. 'We had only gone about fifty yards when his mother came racing out of the front door, missed the steps and hit the pavement with a dreadful thump. The neighbours had heard her howls of agony and they came running to help her. We started to run back to help her too but the two men were sneaking out of the

door and trying blend in with the crowd. Seamus was terrified. He thought they were D'Lacey's men, so we ran away.'

'And you didn't go back later to see if his mother was hurt?'

The woman swallowed hard and shook her head. 'We wanted to. But we were all over the evening papers. Wanted for murder. Seamus was accused of killing Tommy, and blamed for his mother's accident.'

Edge hated moments like this, when the witness was so plausible you almost believe what they're saying. But he was also aware that people got away with murder because of their performance in court. Experience told him to go with his gut feeling. 'I have to find my grandson.' He grabbed the woman by the arm and pulled her to her feet. 'I have to find him first, then we can decide what to do next. So c'mon. Shift yourself.'

Edge caught a glimpse of Vicky as they turned down Bridge Street but he kept on walking and didn't acknowledge her.

The front door of the derelict house was open a few inches. Edge paused and glanced back at the woman. It didn't feel right. He pushed it gently and it swung back with a groan of rusty hinges.

Trying not to crunch on the rubbish, he stepped carefully into the narrow hall and the woman followed, holding onto the back of his coat. For an old building, it was remarkably quiet.

The door to the front room was already hanging off its hinges and they could see a man sitting on a chair in front of the fireplace. He looked uncomfortable, as if his hands were held too tightly behind his back. He lifted his head and when he saw the woman he tried to speak. But all that came out of his swollen mouth was a spray of blood.

It took a second for Edge to notice the second man sitting on the windowsill, his long legs stretched out and his trilby almost covering his eyes.

'What the... Detective Lane?' Edge physically relaxed. 'What are you doing here?'

When Lane lifted his trilby Edge heard the woman behind him give a startled cry, turn around and bolt for the door. But the big frame of Detective Grey appeared and blocked her path.

'Get off me,' she shrieked as she tried to battle her way around him, but he wrapped her in a bear hug, carried her over to the man on the chair and threw her down beside him.

'You stupid bastard,' she screamed at Edge. 'These are the two men that killed Tommy. It was them that beat Tommy to death.' She struggled to her knees and put her arms around the man on the chair who groaned and tried to pull away from her. 'Tell him, Seamus. Tell him. It was them that killed Tommy.'

Before Edge could respond Detective Lane pointed to the battered old armchair by the wall. 'I need you to sit over there, Inspector.'

'What?'

'I said sit over there.'

Edge jerked up to his full height and jabbed a finger at Lane's face. 'Don't you feckin tell me what to do, you little shit. I'm an Inspector. I'm the one who gives the orders around here. I'm the one who tells you what...'

But in the blink of an eye Lane stepped forward with his gun in his hand and he stuck it under Edge's chin. The slate grey eyes were unblinking as they glared at the Inspector. 'Sit down. Now.'

Edge swallowed but didn't back away. 'Look, you're making a huge mistake. These two are...'

Lane rolled his eyes. 'How many times a day do you hear someone say that, Inspector? Every Tom, Dick and Harry insists we're making a huge mistake. And do you ever believe them? Now sit down.'

The fabric of the armchair was threadbare and the stuffing reeked of decay as Edge lowered himself into it. 'Look, you have to believe me. These two...'

'...are wanted in Dublin for the murder of Thomas Cassidy.' Lane wagged the gun at the woman who jumped to her feet and looked as if she was going to rush him.

'That's a feckin lie,' she shrieked. 'We saw you hitting him with your batons.'

'And you were seen by several witnesses running from the scene. You ignored the orders of a guard to stop.' Lane let the gun swing towards the woman's face and she sagged back down beside her husband. 'So we're taking you back to Dublin where you'll be charged.'

He turned to Edge. 'Take out your handcuffs, Inspector.'

'What?'

'Your handcuffs. Show them to me.'

Edge undid the overcoat and pulled them out, and Lane grabbed the woman by the hair and made her sit by Edge on the armchair. 'Right, Inspector, put one on her right wrist.'

Edge noticed how thin the woman's wrist was as he clicked the cuff on it.

'Now put it on your right wrist, Inspector.'

'Don't you mean on my...'

'On your right wrist, Inspector. Just do it.'

Edge tried to outstare the detective as he did what he was told.

'The key,' Lane snapped his fingers. 'Give it to me.'

'It's in my jacket pocket. In there.' Edge nodded towards the other room. Lane glanced at the door as he considered what to do.

'Go and get the car.' He took out a wad of pound notes from his top pocket and handed them to Detective Grey. 'Take it to a garage and fill it up. It's a long way to Dublin. And see if you can get something to eat as well. I don't want to stop once we're on our way.'

Grey nodded and disappeared out the door.

'I don't understand this,' Edge said as he adjusted his hand so the woman could sit on the arm of the chair. 'What are you doing here? How did you know these two were here in this house?'

'I followed you, you big eejit.' He pointed the gun at the woman again. 'I thought I recognized her when she walked past the courthouse, but I couldn't remember from where. Then you took off like a rabbit on a promise so my curiosity was aroused. I wanted to know what the excitement was all about. We lost you for a while when you went into the town park, but we decided to hang around anyway in case you came back that way. And guess what?' He nodded at Seamus. 'Your man here came out of this wreck of a house and walked right by us. I recognized

him immediately. Well, you don't forget a face when there's a huge reward attached to it. So we tailed him to the shop and back again. Then just as we're wondering what to do next we hear all this howling and yelling. So we wait a while. Then a short time later who comes out but the famous Inspector Edge, disguised in a dirty auld overcoat. And Mrs Cassidy herself.'

Lane sat back on the windowsill and stretched out his legs again. 'So Detective Grey followed you while I paid Mr Cassidy a call. As you can see, he resisted arrest and had to be restrained.'

Seamus said something but it was too muffled to hear, and the woman sobbed.

Edge shifted in his seat. 'So you must know I was acting under duress.'

Lane snorted. 'You were acting under duress?'

'Yes. Isn't it obvious? These people...'

'...that you are involved with...'

'No,' Edge barked. 'I'm not involved with them. I don't even know who they are. I didn't even know they existed until today.'

'Well, that's not what it looks like to me.' Lane spat on the floor and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. 'You and Mrs Cassidy looked like you were on a mission when you walked out of here. So what were you up to? You were obviously in it together, so what was it?'

Edge moved so suddenly the woman almost fell off the chair. 'I was only with her because they kidnapped my grandson. They threatened to harm him if I didn't do what they said.'

'We did not.' The woman pulled her arm back.

'You bloody well did.' Edge jerked the cuffs again, making her curse. 'You took my grandson and you threatened to harm him.'

'Yeah? Well, we only said that to make you behave. We never touched that child.'

'Why are you denying it? You kidnapped my grandson.'

The woman jerked her arm again. 'Jasus, I said you were a thick country cop. If you'd been following us properly you'd have noticed the lad walked straight on when I turned in here. He went straight on to school. He never came in here. We only said that to frighten you, to make you help us look for the ...'

She glanced over at Lane who was watching her intensely. 'To help you look for the what?' he growled.

'Nothing.' She looked away too quickly. Lane stood up with a sinister slowness and strode over to her, and he tapped her face with the gun. 'What was he helping you look for?'

'I told you. Nothing.'

Lane looked as if a light suddenly came on in his head. 'Of course. I remember now. You stole something, didn't you? That's why we were sent to your house that day. All the guards in the city were out looking for you. My God, it must have been something really important because they put a huge reward on your head. We were instructed to find you at all cost.'

'And that's why you killed Tommy? Because he wouldn't tell you where we were?'

‘We didn’t kill Tommy,’ Lane scoffed. ‘That fella had a head on him like a bull. How was I to know one good clout would crack it like an egg? Anyway, he hit it on the floor when he fell so it was just an accident. Nothing more.’

‘So why are you saying we murdered him?’

Lane tapped the woman’s face with the gun again. ‘So where is it? Where’s the thing you stole? Show me.’

‘She hasn’t got it,’ Edge said, pulling the woman towards him.

Lane grunted and pressed the gun harder against the woman’s face. ‘Don’t feckin lie to me, you miserable cow. Do I look as thick as the Inspector there? Do I look as if I was born yesterday?’

‘It’s true,’ Edge said. ‘It wasn’t where they thought it was. We searched the place from top to bottom but we couldn’t find it.’

Lane stood up straight. ‘I don’t get it. Explain it to me. Why were you looking for something you already had? What happened to it that you had to go looking for it?’

‘It was stolen from us. The day after we got it, a girl I shared a room with stole it off us.’ The woman avoided looking at Lane. ‘That’s why we were in Dublin. We were looking for her. So instead of attacking us, if you’d helped us we might have caught the bitch.’

Lane’s rat eyes danced from one of them to the other. ‘Naw. I don’t believe a word of it. We would have heard about it. If one of our local felons was trying to flog something as valuable as what you stole, we would have known about it. We have more grasses in Dublin than Phoenix Park itself. They’d drop each other in the shit for half a pint of cider and a packet of fags. So c’mon. Tell me where it is.’ He scratched his nose. ‘In fact, tell me what it is. We were never party to that information, for some strange reason. They put a notice on it. But it certainly caused panic amongst the upper echelons of the establishment, bless their cotton socks. So what is it?’

The woman looked at her husband with questions in her eyes. He shrugged. He looked too broken to resist anymore.

‘It was the title deeds to a house in Dublin,’ she said. ‘And we didn’t steal them. Seamus won them in a game of cards.’

Lane did a funny little jig, skipping from one foot to the other and flapping his arms around. ‘That is the biggest load of bullshit I ever heard. If you’re trying to...’

‘It’s true,’ Edge said. ‘Some fella called D’Lacey put up the deeds to his family estate. He lost. Seamus had a better hand, so...’

‘D’Lacey?’ Lane’s eyebrows almost touched his hairline and he gave a lopsided sneer. ‘The Government Minister? One of the most powerful men in Ireland? Good God almighty. I can’t... but he’s the richest man in the country. Why would he put up the deeds of his estate to cover a stake in a poker game when he could buy and sell everyone around him?’

‘It wasn’t the man himself,’ the woman said. ‘It was his son, Rupert.’

‘Oh, that pig’s arse? Well, that sounds like something he’d do alright. That dope is always in trouble, always in the papers because he did something stupid. Well, well, they certainly covered that up.’ He gave a sharp chuckle. ‘Just imagine his Da’s reaction when they told him his son had gambled away his beautiful big

house. I bet he erupted like a Hawaiian volcano. The fallout would have hit the whole of Dublin. And all outlying districts.'

Lane hardly paused for breath as he paced back and forth across the room. 'So that's why all the guards in Dublin were out looking for you. D'Lacey pulled the Commissioner's chain. But they didn't want to embarrass Rupert, the poor man, so we weren't told what you stole. Just that it was something of great value. They put up a substantial reward for the person who got it back. Discreetly, of course.'

'But there was no need for any of it,' the woman sighed. 'Seamus was going to return it right from the start. He was going to take it to D'Lacey himself and negotiate a return fee. But before he could do anything it was stolen from us. Then we saw you killing Tommy so we ran. The next day it was in all the papers. We were wanted for his murder. We had no choice but to disappear too.'

'So what brought you here to this dump?'

'We found out the thieving cow used to live here the Tralee. So we searched her room, but we couldn't find anything.'

'So what did she say about it?' Lane's hand was getting tired and he lowered the gun.

'She isn't there anymore,' Edge said. 'She went home years ago.'

'She did not,' the woman spat. 'She's dead. That's why the deeds have to still be here.'

'No,' Edge insisted. 'They aren't in the house because she took them with her when she left.'

'She's dead,' the woman practically screeched at Lane as she jabbed her thumb at Edge. 'Because this fella killed her. It's common knowledge around here.'

Edge yanked the cuffs and pulled the woman back. 'That's a load of...'

Lane raised the gun and his eyes widened. 'You killed her for the deeds?'

'No.' Edge shifted angrily in the chair. 'I didn't know anything about the deeds until today. These two cretins threatened to harm my grandson unless I helped them find the deeds. We searched her old room from top to bottom but there is no sign of any deeds. Or anything that looked like deeds. And I did not kill her.'

A car drove by and Lane ran to the window. It wasn't Detective Grey so he turned back and waved the gun around again. 'Right, I haven't got the patience for any more of this bullshit. So the plan is this. You will give me the deeds and as soon as I'm out of here you will be free to go. I'll hand the deeds to D'Lacey and that will be the end of the story. So c'mon. Give them to me now.'

When no one moved he stamped his foot and caused little clouds of dust to pop up between the floorboards. Then he looked at each of them in turn before going over to the woman. He grabbed her hair and forced her head back, and he shoved the gun into her mouth.

'Right, you are the least valuable member of the team. Seamus on his own will get us the reward. All I have to do is present him to D'Lacey and Detective Grey and I can see out our days in luxury. And D'Lacey will have great fun extracting the whereabouts of the deeds from Seamus. He might even let us watch. But I would rather avoid all that. I would rather not have passengers on our trip to the big city. I would rather we parted as friends, kissed each other goodbye and drove off into the sunset with the deeds and no hard feelings. So what do you say?'

Again no one answered and Lane gave a groan that came from the depth of his stomach. 'Alright, I will count to three and then I will blow your feckin head off. One, two...'

Chapter 31

'Eamon.'

Foley glanced up from his cup of tea at the pale anxious face of his sister. 'What?'

'I asked you if you saw Liam today.' Vicky was clearing the supper dishes and putting them in the sink.

'No.' Foley tried to drag himself away from Eleanor Carmady. She was filling his head. He couldn't shake off the look she gave him as he was leaving the pub. He couldn't decide if it was anger or disappointment. 'I didn't see him today. Why?'

'I don't know. He was acting very strange earlier.'

'What do you mean?'

'He turned up here with a woman and said they had to stay here for a couple of hours, and they made me go out.'

'What?' Foley gave a shocked chuckle. 'Are you saying Liam Edge brought a woman back here?'

Vicky shook her head. 'I don't think it was like that. They both looked very ...how would you put it? Distressed? Liam said it was something to do with the court case. But he didn't look right. He was wearing a dirty old raincoat, all creased and greasy. They were like a couple of cats on a hot tin roof.'

'So what did he say? Didn't he explain himself?'

'No, he didn't. But I'm sure the woman was the one who was in here with Joe when I caught him searching your room. The one who said she was Alex Cassidy.'

This time Foley jerked up straight. 'Are you sure?'

Vicky gave a big sigh. 'No. I'm confused if you want to know. I'm sure it was the same woman who came here. But I'm certain she isn't the Alex Cassidy that used to live here. There is a similarity, long black hair and that, but up close she's nothing like the girl we used to know.'

She wiped her hands on her apron and poured herself another cup of tea. 'I have an awful bad feeling about this, Eamon. Something's not right. I think I should go over to the courthouse and find out where Liam is now. See if we can find out what's going on.'

Foley swallowed the last of his tea and stood up. 'You're probably right. I have no idea what he's up to but it certainly is strange. I'll go and find him.'

The clerk at the courthouse said Inspector Edge wasn't needed to give evidence so they presumed he went home. Then Foley remembered Vicky saying she'd seen him in Bridge Street. Could he have been on his way to the Garda Barracks? Foley headed across town.

He could hear the commotion before he even opened the door to the reception area. The Super was surrounded by Mixer Daly and his family and they were all shouting at the same time. Sgt Fitzgerald was trying to calm them down by

making them sit down on the bench by the wall, but as one sat down another jumped back up.

Mrs Daly spotted Foley and she let out a shriek. 'That's the fella.' Her long thin finger pointed at him. 'That's the maggot who stole the ring.'

'Foley.' Sgt Fitzgerald practically ran at him. 'What are you doing back here? Your shift is over already.'

'Sorry, Sarge. I'm looking for Inspector Edge.'

'Who?'

'Liam Edge. My step-father. He's in town for a court case so I thought he might have called in to say hello to his old pals.'

'No. Didn't see him. But now you're here, what did you do with that ring you took from the body you found out in Blennerville? It isn't in the evidence room.'

'I have it in my pocket.'

'Why in God's name have you got it in your pocket? It's supposed to be with your report.'

'I needed it to show to...' he looked around at the sea of faces that were all glaring at him. '... Jacob Butts, the fella who sold the pig to Jackie Maher.'

'Who sold the what?' The Super was all red in the face and he wiped his forehead before he put his cap back on with an angry flourish. 'What on earth are you talking about? Pigs? What have pigs got to do with you having Mrs Daly's ring in your pocket?'

Foley could feel the anger radiating off Mrs Daly. 'You stole my Paudy's ring. You're a feckin thief. You're all feckin thieves, the whole lot of you. Give it back to me. Now!'

Foley looked at the sergeant. 'The ring is evidence, Sarge. What do you want me to do with it?'

'Give it to me,' the Super snapped his fingers and held out his hand. Foley dropped the ring into the open palm. The Super handed it to Mixer Daly who took it with a reverence associated with something sacred, and for a moment his eyes glistened.

'You took it off a dead fella?' Mrs Daly was still glaring at Foley.

'You know I did.' Foley held her stare. 'We took it off the young fella we found over in Blennerville.'

'I know that. But where did he get it? Where did he get my boy's ring in the first place?'

Foley glanced at the sergeant again.

'Is there something you're not telling us?' Spittle dripped from Mrs Daly's mouth. 'Do you know what happened to my Paudy? You do, don't you? Why won't you tell me? What happened to my boy? Tell me. How did the dead fella get his ring? What did the dead fella do to my Paudy?'

Sergeant Fitzgerald moved between Foley and Mrs Daly and he tried to get her to sit down. But she stood up on her toes and defied him. 'Where did that dead fella get Paudy's ring?'

Sgt Fitzgerald looked at the Super for advice. Was it safe to tell them what Foley had discovered today? But the Super was too busy pacifying Mixer to notice.

'Look, Mrs Daly,' Fitz put his hand out to her. 'All we know is the ring was found by Jackie Maher when he slaughtered a pig back in February.'

'What?' Mixer held the ring against his chest. 'They found Paudy's ring in a pig? What are you saying? Paudy was killed by a pig? A pig swallowed... what are you saying?'

'Oh my God.' Mrs Daly grabbed her husband's arm. 'Did a pig...?'

'Look, the thing is this,' Foley shouted at her. 'The farmer who owned the pig says it must have been in the swill he fed to his animals. He buys the swill from lots of places, hotels, pubs, other farmers, even the butchers. So Paudy could have lost the ring in any one of those places.'

Mixer hugged his wife and kissed the ring. 'I can't listen to any more of this,' he said in a sad voice. Then he steered his wife towards the door. 'But don't think for a moment this is over. I will be back. And I'll be wanting answers.'

As the door swung shut behind them the Super straightened his jacket and brushed imaginary dust off it. 'So that's all you came back with today, Foley? The ring could have got into the pig swill anywhere in the whole of the country? Really?'

'Yes Sir. Jacob Butts has swill delivered to the house. But he has no idea where it comes from.'

'Then you'd better get back up there and find out.'

Foley looked at Sergeant Fitzgerald. 'Do you want me to clock back on?'

'Tomorrow,' the Super growled as he turned and marched back to his office.

'You heard the Super.' The sergeant nodded towards the door. 'First thing tomorrow morning get back out to the pig man. And take Guerin with you. He'll get more sense out of the man than you ever will.'

'No problem, Sarge.' Foley flicked a salute, put his cap back on and headed back over to the courthouse. Some of the Limerick guards might still be there and they might be able to say where Liam Edge went.

Chapter 32

As Foley turned the corner into Rock Street he got the strangest feeling he was being followed. He stopped to look in a shop window but the street was busy and he wasn't sure if the person stopping to light a cigarette was just a coincidence. So when he drew level with the archway to the market he ducked into it and flattened himself against the wall.

A second later a young man came rushing through the arch and Foley stepped out in front of him. 'Can I help you?'

The man jumped back and balled his fists. 'Ah, Guard Foley.' He opened them again and glanced around. 'I wanted a word with you.'

'All right.' Foley studied the face for a moment, noticing some familiar features. 'You're one of the Dalys, aren't you?'

'I am. I'm Michael.'

This time it was Foley who balled his fists. 'And what can I do for you, Michael?'

Michael gave another nervous glance around him. 'Look, I don't want to be seen talking to a guard. Can we go someplace quieter?'

'The whole piggin' town is used to seeing your family spoken to by the guards,' Foley thought, but he didn't say it. He nodded towards a lean-to with a load of machinery and boxes stacked in it. 'Over there?'

Michael looked doubtful but he followed anyway. As they stood back in the shadows he cleared his throat several times.

'Are you alright, Michael?'

'Yes.' Again he cleared his throat. 'The thing is, we were brought up not to trust the guards. You treat us like something that squirts out of a cow's arse.'

'We do not.'

'Well, mostly you do. And I'm not sure I trust you either. But I desperately need to know what happened to my brother Paudy.'

'We'd all like to know that. But right now you know as much as we do.' Foley caught something in the look on Michael's face. 'Or do you know something we don't?'

Michael's head gave the slightest of shakes and he looked down at his hands.

'So what is it, Michael? What do you want to tell me?'

'I... look, you have to promise to keep my name out of this. No one must ever know I spoke to you about it.'

'How can I promise you that when I don't even know what you're talking about? You'll have to give me something first.'

'All right.' Michael tried to sink back farther into the shadows but he was already flat against the wall. 'When did they find Paudy's ring inside the pig?'

Foley had to think for a moment. 'According to Jackie Maher, he bought the pig in February. He would have slaughtered it right away. Why do you ask?'

Michael's eyes filled up and he rubbed them with his fingers. 'And do you know who he bought the pig from?'

'A fella called Jacob Butts.'

'Was he a small fella? A bit strange looking?'

'Yes. But why are you asking about that? What's he got to do with Paudy?'

Michael sniffed and cleared his throat again. 'You have to swear my name won't be brought into it. No one must ever know I spoke to you about it.'

Foley shrugged. 'I told you already. I can't make a promise like that until I know more about what happened. So tell me, Michael. What do you know?'

'I can't...look, you have to understand. Paudy was always their golden boy. They thought the sun shone out of his ear. Ma worshipped the ground he walked on so it was always Paudy first. But he was not the saint they made him out to be. He was a selfish little shit who only ever looked out for himself. And when she finds out what he was up to she'll be devastated. But she'll be even more disgusted if she finds out I was the one who told the guards about him.'

'Told the guards what about him?'

Michael gave a soft whimper and stood away from the wall. 'I can't. They'll kill me if they find out. You have to say you'll keep my name out of it.'

'Michael, I'll do my best. I promise you. But it all depends on what you have to tell me. I can't make a promise I can't keep. So what don't you want your family to know about Paudy?'

Another shiver and a resigned shake of the head. 'That he and our cousin Arthur tried to rob the fella with the pigs. They saw the money he made at the market and they followed him home.'

'They followed him all the way to his house? Why? They could easily have robbed him before that.'

'They could. But they thought he'd have more money in his house. And maybe some other valuable stuff as well.'

'So they knew Jacob Butts already? And they knew where he lived?'

'No, no. He was chosen at random. They had a routine. They'd scout around until they found a suitable victim and they'd follow him when he left the market. Then they'd pounce, fast and vicious. They'd seen that small fella before but he was always with his father. Then one day he was on his own. The father had died. They assumed he was an easy target because he was so small.'

'So Paudy and Arthur followed him home to rob him?'

'Yeah.'

'And how do you know so much about it, Michael?'

Michael looked up at the sky. 'Will you keep me out of it?'

'I don't know. First, tell me how you know so much about it.'

'Because I was with them.'

Foley took out a packet of cigarettes, pulled one out with his teeth and offered one to Michael. Michael took it and waited until Foley lit it. Then he took a long drag.

'So you, Paudy and your cousin followed Jacob Butts home. And what happened then?'

'Well, when we got there it was already getting dark, and we were confused by the cut of the house. We'd never seen a house like it. You could only see the top of it and you had to cross a funny little bridge to get to the front door. Arthur told me to scout around to see if there was another way in. And to make sure the little fella couldn't escape. Anyway, I couldn't find anything so I headed back. That was when I heard this almighty scream. It stuck me to the ground. I'd never heard anything like it before in my whole life. It was horrendous. I felt sick to my stomach because I thought they'd done something terrible to the small man. I wanted nothing to do with that so there was no way I was going in there. I was too frightened of what I might see. I would have run away there and then but my legs had given out. So I had no choice but to stay where I was. Anyway, when the lads didn't come back out I assumed they'd found the stash and were celebrating. But I wanted no part of it. Eventually, I managed to walk away and I made it back home.'

He took another long drag of his cigarette. 'When Paudy and Arthur didn't come home I thought they'd found the fortune they were hoping for. I thought they'd gone off to some exotic place to live the high life. I felt terrible because I couldn't tell anyone. They'd have blamed me for not stopping him. I just kept hoping he'd send a message home to say they were fine and not to worry about them.'

He sighed and sucked on his cigarette again. 'Then you turned up with that stupid ring and it was like a blow to the guts. I felt sick all over again. Now I was thinking that maybe the screams weren't from the pig man. Maybe he'd ambushed the lads somehow and then fed... well, you know. It's filled my head ever since. I

remembered that right after the scream I heard pigs going mad, squealing like banshees. I thought it was because they'd had a fright, but now I think it was because the...'

He bent over and got sick on the ground, making Foley jump out of the way. Then he stood up quickly and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

'I'm sorry about that. I feel sick just thinking about it.' He flicked something off his lip. 'I tried to convince myself Paudy had lost that ring. Or sold it. It was a special ring but Paudy was that kind of person. He'd sell his mother for a quick buck.'

A young lad with a donkey sauntered past and gave the two of them a funny look before tugging at the reins and walking on. Foley flicked his cigarette butt on the ground and stamped on it.

'Michael, you know the Super will want to know where I got this information before he'll even consider following it up. He's terrified of upsetting your Da, as you well know. So he won't even discuss it unless he's certain he can prove it.'

'No. When they find out what happened to Paudy it'll probably kill my Ma anyway. But if they find out I was there too and I didn't say anything to them about it they'll be furious. And if they find out I told you instead of them, well that would be the end of me. They'll never forgive me for that.'

'But haven't they got the right to know what happened to their son? Wouldn't you rather put them out of their misery?'

Michael walked to the edge of the shed and looked up at the sky again. 'Yes, you're right. But you have no idea how they'll react. They'll blame the whole world. There will be blood on the walls. I'm just sorry I haven't the courage to tell them myself. And I haven't the courage to be there when you tell them either. So can I ask you for one big favour? Don't say anything until tomorrow. Keep it to yourself until this time tomorrow. Can you do that for me?'

Foley walked up beside him. 'Why? You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?'

'No, no.' Michael spat his cigarette butt on the ground. 'Actually, I'm going to England.'

'Oh? Isn't that a bit rash? Where will you go?'

'I have a place. It's sorted already.'

Foley chuckled. 'So this isn't just a chance encounter? You had it planned.'

'Not talking to you, though. That wasn't planned. It was just that when I saw you in the barracks just now I had a desperate urge to say something. I wanted to scream at the lot of them, the way they were carrying on as if Saint Paudy had been martyred for the cause. I wanted to say he was just a low-life thief who robbed people. He was brutal. God forgive me but he got what he deserved. And good riddance to him.'

He dug his hands into his pockets and went to walk away. Then he glanced back at Foley. 'Will you give me until tomorrow?'

Foley shrugged. 'To be honest, by the time I speak to my sergeant and he speaks to the Super, it could be days before anything is done anyway. So I'd say you have loads of time.'

'Thank you. I had a feeling you were one of the good guys, as James Cagney would say.'

'Yeah, tell that to the Super. So when did you plan this trip to England?'

'Ages ago. The day I met Bridie, in fact.'

'Bridie?'

'She's my fiancé.'

'Your fiancé? Right. So what does your family feel about that?'

'They don't know.' Michael had a defiant look on his face. 'And they don't even know about Bridie either. Bridie knows all about them—who doesn't—but I wouldn't bring her home to meet them. She'd be mortified if she saw the cut of our house. And my Ma would eat her alive. She's not the kind of woman they want for me. She's kind and gentle. Anyway, her brother got me a job on a building site in Birmingham. We can stay with him and his wife until we get a place of our own.'

'So when are you going?'

'In the morning. We're taking the eight o'clock train to Dublin to catch the ferry to Holyhead.'

'And you're just going to leave without saying goodbye to your family?'

Michael snorted and waved it away. 'They won't miss me. They'll look around one day and ask who was the young fella who slept in that bed?'

'No, they won't.'

Michael turned suddenly and put his hand on Foley's chest. 'I'm only telling you this because I trust you not to spread it around. You're a decent man, Foley. I know you'll do the right thing. You'll find out what happened to Paudy and you'll break it to them gently. And if you have to include me in it that's fine too. But don't do anything until tomorrow. And don't tell them where I went. Just tell them I'm fine, and I'll write sometime. They probably won't want to hear that, but tell them anyway.'

Then he turned and walked away.

'Good luck,' Foley called after him.

Chapter 33

'All right, all right.' Seamus Cassidy rattled so hard on his chair it moved forward about two feet. 'I'll tell you. I'll tell you where it is.'

Detective Lane studied him for a long moment before he took the gun out of the woman's mouth. Then he walked over to Seamus and tapped him on the head with it. 'You'd better not be lying to me.'

'I'm not. I'll tell you where it is. But you have to let her go. Please. Just let her go and I'll tell you what you want to know.'

Lane gave a cackle of a laugh. 'Are you serious? Can't you see the situation you're in? What's going to happen is this - you're going to tell me what I want to know or she'll be in no position to go anywhere. So stop wasting my time. Speak.'

Seamus closed his eyes as the gun hovered in front of his face. 'It's hidden in my mother's house.'

Lane heard the woman gasp and he stepped back. And his eyes narrowed as they darted from one of them to the other. 'In your mother's house in Dublin?'

‘Yes. There’s a statue of The Sacred Heart in the kitchen and it has a hole in the back of it. My mother used to hide stuff in it, bills and letters, stuff she didn’t want my Da to see.’

Lane did another little shuffle as he thought about this then he turned back to the woman. ‘Is that true?’

The woman looked shocked. ‘I don’t... Seamus, for God’s sake! What are you doing? Don’t lie to him, you feckin eejit. He’ll kill you if he finds out you lied to him. Just tell him the truth. Please, just tell him what happened. That little cow stole it from us. Just tell him that. She stole it and now we don’t know where it is. Tell him. We don’t know where it is.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Seamus gave a choking sob. ‘I am so sorry, Alex. It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this. I had a plan. But things happened too fast and it all went wrong. I thought I was being smart. I’m so, so sorry.’

Lane tapped him on the head again. ‘Stop crying like a big girl and start explaining. If the deeds are in Dublin what the feck are you doing looking for it here in Tralee? I don’t get it. Explain yourself.’

Seamus tried to shake away the tears dripping from his chin. ‘I panicked, all right? When I won that game I went into shock. Common sense told me I was way out of my depth. But those deeds were worth a fortune and I wanted some of it. People were warning me that Rupert was furious. They said leave the envelope on the table and just walk away because he’d send someone after me and he’d get it back anyway.’ He licked his bruised lips. ‘But all I saw was a chance to get rich quick. My brother Tommy was with me and in all the excitement I managed to slip him the envelope. Then as I went to the bar I picked up a menu and folded it into the shape of the envelope. And I made a big show of letting it poke out of my inside pocket. Then I let it be known I gave it to Alex to look after.’

The woman howled as she tried to rush at him and she nearly pulled Liam Edge off the armchair. ‘You bastard. I can’t believe... how could you do this to me? After everything I did for you. I stood by you all these years. I followed you all over this God-forsaken country because I believed we were looking for the little cow that stole the deeds from us. You had me living in stinking holes like this, cold and hungry and wearing rags. Afraid to go out in case I was arrested. And all the time you knew where the deeds were. What was going on in that stupid head of yours?’

‘I was terrified.’ Seamus rattled the chair again. ‘In my head, it was so simple. I was going to get the envelope from Tommy and take it straight over to D’Lacey’s father. But I was terrified I was going to be ambushed on the way by Rupert trying to save face. He’d do anything to stop his father from finding out. Then that girl stole your stuff and I saw a way to cause a distraction. I got Billy McStay to spread the word that the deeds were stolen to confuse Rupert’s people. It was meant to give us time to get to his father without being attacked. But when they beat Tommy to death...’

‘That was an accident,’ Lane snapped.

‘...I knew I was out of my depth. All I could think about was getting you away from D’Lacey. I thought maybe when it all quietened down we could go back to the house and try again.’

‘But you could have told me,’ the woman wailed. ‘Why didn’t you tell me all this? You could have trusted me. Why didn’t you trust me, Seamus?’

'I did trust you,' Seamus sobbed. 'And I was going to tell you. But when they told me Billy was dead...'

'Billy?'

'Billy McStay. They killed him too.'

Detective Lane stepped back when all eyes turned on him. 'It was nothing to do with me. I don't even know Billy what's-his-name.'

'My God. When did that happen?' The woman's voice shook.

'Not long after Tommy was killed. They said it was an accident. He drowned while out fishing. But his brother said the body was found half a mile away from where Billy usually fished. According to the brother, Billy never bothered with that stretch of river because it was useless. He said you couldn't even catch a cold there, never mind a fish. And they found his tin of homemade flies on a rock near his usual spot. He spent hours making those flies and they were precious to him. So he would never just leave them if he was going to fish somewhere else.'

The woman wiped her eyes and sat back down next to Edge.

'And the brother said Billy's clothes were torn as if he was in some sort of struggle,' Seamus continued. 'But the guards put it down to a tragic accident. He slipped on a stone, banged his head and drowned. Case closed.'

When a car drove up and stopped outside the house Lane ran to the window again. This time he took out the key to the handcuffs and went across to Seamus, and he started to undo them. 'Right. Time to go.'

'So you won't be needing us anymore now.' Edge tried to stand up but slipped back down again. 'He told you what you wanted to know.'

Lane grunted but didn't look up. 'You think I'm a right eejit, don't you, Inspector? You think I believe all that horseshit about a statue with a hole in it. Well, I don't. So that's why Seamus is coming with me. He's my retirement fund. Once I hand him over and collect the reward it'll be goodbye Baby Blue. I'll be disappearing into the sunset, but not on a horse, you understand? In a brand new motorcar. Red. Or maybe black.'

This time Edge managed to stand and Lane jerked up and pointed the gun at him. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'What?'

'Sit down, Inspector.'

'But you're taking all of us?'

'Good God, no.' Lane's voice was deep and sinister. He was struggling to undo the handcuffs with one hand while waving the gun in the other. So out of sheer impatience, he put the gun on the floor.

Edge felt the woman lean into him and give a long moan. He put his arm around her and glanced up just as Lane released one of Seamus' hands. And when Seamus threw himself backwards he sent Lane sprawling back against the fireplace scattering the coal bucket and the poker. Then Seamus snatched up the gun and ran over to the woman.

'Give me the key,' he screamed at Edge as he pulled at their handcuff. 'C'mon. Give me the key.'

'I haven't got the key,' Edge shouted back. 'It's in my jacket in the other room.'

Seamus grabbed the Inspector's arm, pulled him to his feet and pushed him towards the door, causing the woman to stagger along with them.

'Freeze.' The huge frame of Detective Grey filled the doorway and he held his gun with both hands. 'Put down the gun and back away.'

Seamus didn't hesitate. He threw himself in front of the woman and raised his gun. And both men fired at the same time in an explosion of noise and smoke.

Detective Grey disappeared back out the door with blood spraying from a hole in his throat, and his gun flew out of hand.

Seamus flew backwards too and he hit the woman with such force she pulled Liam Edge on top of her when she hit the ground. And her knee caught Edge between the legs, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to double up in agony.

Through the haze of pain, Edge could hear Detective Lane swearing and pulling at something on the ground. He forced himself to sit up and he shoved the woman's arm out of the way as he untangled himself from her. And he saw that Lane was pulling at Seamus, screaming at him to get up. But from the angle of the head and the amount of blood pooling around the hole in his chest, Seamus wasn't going to get up ever again.

'You're too late,' Edge said. 'Leave him alone.'

Lane rocked back on his heels and buried his face in his hands. 'Shit, shit, shit.'

'Seamus?' The woman's hand was clutching her stomach and blood bubbled between her fingers.

'Oh my God.' Edge rolled onto his knees and turned her onto her back, and he lifted her hand to check the damage. Then he put her hand back over the wound. 'Get help. C'mon. She's been shot. Quick.'

Lane stood up and looked around at the mess with eyes that were wide and furious. 'This is all your fault.' He pointed a shaky finger at Edge. 'If you had minded your own business none of this would have happened. You caused all this.'

'For God's sake, just go and get help. What's the matter with you?'

Lane ran across to Detective Grey and started searching his pockets, pulling stuff out and throwing it away. Then he held up the car keys and ran back to Edge.

'All is not lost, Inspector,' he chuckled. 'I can still claim that reward. The reward is for the capture of either one of them. Lift her up.'

Edge pushed him away. 'She's been shot, you moron. She's not fit to go anywhere. If you want her to live you'd better go and get help. So go on. Go!'

Lane dropped to his knees instead and started scrabbling around the floor. 'The key to the handcuffs. Where's that feckin key to the handcuffs? It has to be here somewhere. C'mon, where are you?'

When his hand brushed against the gun he snatched it up and waved it at Edge. 'You have a key to those handcuffs. Where is it?'

'I told you already. It's in my jacket in the other room. But you haven't got time for that. She needs help now. Just go and get help.'

Edge suddenly turned towards the window. 'What's that?'

Out in the street he could hear voices, people speaking cautiously and getting nearer. 'Hear that? There are people out there. Call them. Tell them to get help.'

Lane spun around several times before running across to the other room. A short time later he was back, his eyes blazing. 'Where's your jacket? There's no jacket in there. Where is it?'

He ran at Edge and hit him in the face with the gun. Edge fell back and the woman groaned. And for a brief moment, something on the floor under the armchair glistened in the weak light. Edge held his face and bent lower, but now Lane was standing over him again.

'She's coming with me,' he ranted. 'I want the key to the handcuffs. I need that key.'

'Look, just calm down.' Edge straightened up and rubbed the cut on his face. 'Maybe we can carry her between us.'

'What do you mean we, you big eejit,' Lane snorted. 'Do you think I'm that stupid? I'm taking her to Dublin. I'm going to collect that reward. But not with you. You know too much.' He pointed the gun at Edge's head again. 'But I can't carry her if there's a lump of dead meat handcuffed to her. So I have to find that key.'

He threw himself on the floor again and searched around the chair that Seamus was sitting on, and he gave a high pitched cheer as he jumped up again waving a key. But the noise from the people outside distracted him. They were getting closer and more vocal.

'I'm afraid we'll have to be leaving you now, Inspector.' The sneer twisted up the corner of his mouth. 'I can't say it was nice knowing you, but all the same...'

When he turned around the sneer disappeared. Edge was pointing Detective Grey's gun at him.

'It's not goodbye, Detective Lane.' Edge waved him towards the chair. 'I might not be seeing you for a while, but it's certainly not goodbye. So just put the gun down and slide the key over to me.'

Lane looked at the key in his hand and then at his gun, and the shadow that crossed his face told Edge exactly what he was going to do next. He jerked up straight, dropped the key and raised his gun. And he died instantly when Inspector Liam Edge shot him in the heart.

Edge dropped the gun and turned to the woman, and as he bent down to lift her the pain that wrapped itself around his chest jerked him upright again. His left arm felt as if it was on fire and his chest felt as if it was being crushed. He couldn't draw breath. It was like sinking deep underwater, the pressure assaulting his lungs. He thought he could hear voices, a door crashing open, hands pulling at him, loosening his collar. But the light was dimming. And everything was fading. Then he was floating away into a strange darkness.

Chapter 34

It was another beautiful morning as Foley and John Guerin cycled through Blennerville and out towards Jacob Butts' pig farm.

'So that's all you heard?' Foley asked for the third time. 'There was some sort of gun fight and several people are dead?'

'I told you, you know as much as me. When the lads turned up for their shift this morning they were sent straight over to the Green. But no one knew the whole story. The Super was buzzing around like a demented wasp shouting instructions and Sgt Fitzgerald was happily ignoring them. I think Fitz wanted to call a proper briefing but the Super's pants were on fire.'

'He isn't cut out for front line policing, you know,' Foley sniffed. 'If he hasn't got a chart in front of him he couldn't even organize a piss-up in a brewery.'

'Well, it's lucky Sgt Fitzgerald has a good head on him. I love the way he looks at the Super. His mouth is saying Yes, Sir but his eyes are saying feckin eejit.'

Foley laughed so loud his bike wobbled and he almost fell down a pot hole.

'Anyway,' Guerin steered around him. 'When you turned up and told me the Super wanted the two of us out here today I was relieved, I can tell you. I'd rather be out in the beautiful sunshine than standing in a road somewhere holding a crowd back. Wouldn't you, Eamon?'

'Damn right I would. But I'm a bit worried that Fitz wasn't too bothered about us not being there. I got the impression he was happy to have us out of the way.'

'Naw,' Guerin chuckled. 'That's because he only wants people who'll do what they're told and not be answering him back all the time.'

'What? That's not us. When have we ever answered him back?'

'So when are you going to tell him about your meeting with Michael Daly?' Guerin braked and sat upright as he shielded his eyes from the sun.

'Well as I said, we'll see what we can get out of Mr Butts first. I dread having to face the Super if I can't back up what Michael told me. I know the Dalys are as bent as a hairclip but I believe Michael. But with him in England and the Super wetting himself over what Mixer will do next, I can't risk saying anything just yet. If I balls this up I can kiss my job goodbye.'

'That would be a shame,' Guerin smirked.

'Ha, ha, ha. You'd miss me.'

'I would. I'd miss you like... what's that thing called? You know, where your head throbs and you're so sick you can't even lift your head off the pillow? I know. Migraine.'

'That's very funny. You should be on the stage. There's one leaving in ten minutes. Be on it.'

Guerin shushed him and nodded at the odd-looking house on the other side of the field. 'I take it that's the place.'

'Yep.' Foley got off his bike and started pushing it across the grass. 'And it looks like the drawbridge is up.'

'What an amazing house,' Guerin said as they got closer. 'I wonder who built it. Do you think they built it themselves or did they buy it off someone else? Because it's a clever idea. You said the pigs live on the bottom floor.'

'Yes. There's some sort of yard down there.'

Guerin studied the gap between the house and the bank. 'Well, we can't reach the front door from here so there must be another way down.'

Foley tried to see through the thick bushes that surrounded the bank. 'I can't see it from here. The neighbours said there is one but you'd need to be a mountain goat to get down it.'

‘It has to be nearby because his pony is over there and his cart is here. And it can’t be that steep if he has to get his pigs up it. I can’t see him driving them all the way down the river to the bridge and then all the way back up here again.’

‘He doesn’t have to.’ Foley pointed at the front door. ‘He uses a pulley system. There’s a hatch inside the door. He puts the pig on a rig and hauls it up through the hatch.’

Guerin gave a loud whistle. ‘That is brilliant. I had the impression Mr Butts was a bit simple in the head. You know? But maybe I’m wrong about him. Maybe he’s as sharp as my grannie’s tongue. And maybe we should be a little bit cautious around him.’

He started walking along the edge of the bank. ‘Anyway, let’s find the footpath and pay him a visit. Judging by the contour of the land it’s probably over here.’

‘Judging by the what?’

‘My God, Foley, but it’s obvious you’re a townie. It’s a wonder you can find your way out of bed in the morning. I bet you even think potatoes grow on trees. It’s a wonder ...’

‘Listen.’ Foley stopped and turned his head to the house. Above the noise of the river, a voice drifted up to them. ‘There’s someone down there. There’s someone at home. Maybe we should bang on the front door.’

Guerin leant over the edge. ‘He’s home alright. He’s talking to his pigs.’

‘He’s talking to his pigs?’

‘What’s wrong with that? I talk to my dogs. I talk to my chickens. Sometimes I talk to my wife. It makes them feel good. They think you care about them.’

Guerin followed the line of bushes for about two hundred yards with Foley shuffling along behind. Then he gave a grunt, bent down and touched the ground.

‘What you find, Tonto?’ Foley bent forward to see what Guerin was looking at.

‘The path.’

‘Where?’ All Foley could see was the wall of bushes.

Guerin waved him past. ‘Stand over here.’

To his surprise, when Foley walked on about six feet and looked back he could see the gap, and a path sloping away down the bank.

‘All right, clever dick.’ Foley stretched to see where the path led. ‘Now I suppose you expect me to go down there.’

‘I’m not sure you’re cut out for that kind of thing, I’m afraid.’ Guerin pulled a sympathetic face. ‘It’s not like strolling in town, you know. You’ll probably twist your poor ankle and be off work for a month. Perhaps you should just stay here on guard in case Mr Butts shows up.’

‘Ha, ha, ha,’ Foley pushed back some tall weeds and started on down the trail. It obviously wasn’t used every day because nature had reclaimed most of it, but it was still passable.

Due to the recent spell of dry weather the river was low and meandering around little islands of dried stones. And as the path levelled out near the bend Guerin stopped and studied a patch of shallow water. ‘What’s that?’

Foley followed the finger that was pointing at what looked like bones, bleached white by the sun. ‘Well, he is a pig farmer. They’ll have come from the animals he slaughtered.’

Guerin stood up and straightened his cap. 'I dunno. They look a bit like...well, they could be shin bones.'

'Or a pig's leg bone. What do you know? Anyway, before you start dredging the river for bodies I think we should just ask our friend Mr Butts first. He'll probably have a good explanation for them.'

As they approached the house Guerin spotted the figure in the yard. 'Who's the young fella? You didn't tell me he has a son.'

'He hasn't. That's Mr Butts himself.'

'Good God. But he looks like a child from here. He only looks about ten years old.'

When Jacob Butts saw the two guards suddenly appear he got such a fright he turned and fell over a pig. Foley opened the small gate in the wall and Guerin followed him into the yard. And he cursed when the ground squelched under his shoes. 'For God's sake, Eamon. This stuff must be six inches deep.'

'Mr Butts,' Foley called to the figure who was struggling to stand up and, holding his hands out wide as he tried to shake the mess off them. 'I'm Guard Foley. I spoke to you yesterday.'

'You did not.'

Foley glanced back at Guerin. 'Mr Butts, I was here yesterday. I was asking you about some fellas that...'

'You were not.' Butts was backing away towards the slope that led up to the door in the middle section of the house. And the look on his face reminded Foley of a fox about to bolt.

'All right, that's enough,' Foley shouted. 'Stand where you are, Mr Butts. Right now I'm too hot and bothered to go chasing after you. So if I have to I will not be very happy. Do I make myself clear? Now I want to talk to you again. This time it's about two men who came here back in January. The first market day of the new year.'

'No one came here back in January. That's a lie. No one ever comes here.'

'Mr Butts, we have a witness. He was with the two men who came here in January. He saw them go in your front door and he didn't see them come out again. And those two men were never seen again. All that remains of them is that ring I showed you. The ring we found in the belly of one of your pigs. So what happened here, Mr Butts?'

Butts began rubbing the muck off his clothes as he turned in sharp little circles. 'Nothing happened here. What are you talking about? No one came here in January. Whoever told you that is lying. He's telling you a pack of lies. Why do you believe him and not me?'

'Listen to me, Mr Butts. We could stand here all day debating this but I have better things to do with my time. So if you don't tell me what went on here in January I will have to take you back to town and put you in a cell until the detective can get around to interviewing you. Which could be a couple of days. If you're lucky.'

'No. You can't do that. What about my pigs? Who'll look after my pigs? You can't just leave them here with no one to look after them. That's not right.'

'Then tell me what happened here in January.'

Butts stooped down and put his arms around the biggest pig Foley had ever seen. 'It wasn't my fault.'

'Mr Butts...'

'They came charging into my house roaring and screaming and demanding to know where my money was. I was terrified. I couldn't think straight. I was dozing in my chair by the fire and I thought I was having a nightmare.' He hugged the pig and buried his face in its neck. Foley looked back at Guerin who was leaning on the wall and seemed to be engrossed in the river. Butts noticed him too and jumped up.

'What's wrong with him? What's he doing over there? Tell him to stop it. He has no right to be poking around on my property. Tell him...'

Guerin didn't react but Foley noticed the corner of his mouth curl up in a smile. Guerin always maintained that when someone insists you have no right to be looking in a certain place then that's where you should be looking.

'Just ignore him, Mr Butts.' Foley stood between them. 'Just tell me what happened when the men entered your house.'

Butts continued to glare at Guerin until Foley snapped his fingers. 'Mr Butts, what happened after the men came to your house?'

'They disappeared.'

'What? They disappeared?'

'Yeah. Down the hatch.'

Foley looked up at the house. 'What are you saying? You left the hatch open and they fell down into the pigsty?'

'Why wouldn't I leave the hatch open? There's only me in the house. There's no one else in the house so why should I be worried if the hatch is open?' Butts rubbed his hands harder and flicked some more bits of muck away. 'I use the hatch all the time. That's how I feed my pigs. I don't need to use the stairs unless I'm going down to see them. So I leave it alone. It's my house. I can do what I like in my own house, can't I?'

'All right. So they fell down the hatch. What happened then?'

Butts shrugged and rolled his eyes. 'How do I know?'

Foley felt a surge of impatience that came out as a loud groan. 'All right. Show me how this happened, Mr Butts.'

'What?'

'I said show me how it happened. I want you to show me exactly how all this is supposed to have happened.'

'What are you talking about? They fell down the hatch. What's there to show you?'

Foley pointed at the door and glared at Butts with the hardest look he could muster. Butts looked at the door too then slowly shuffled up the slope towards it.

The room reeked of everything to do with pigs and Foley gagged like he did yesterday when the cloying air captured his throat. But there was another smell too. Rotting meat? He took out his handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth as he looked around the room. The few items of furniture were old, a single bed back against the wall, a small wardrobe, a table and one broken chair. Sacks and barrels were piled up in the corner amongst piles of other stuff. And the hole in the floor.

Foley pointed at the bed. 'You sleep here?'

'No. Well, I used to. But I sleep upstairs now. My Da's bed is bigger. And here's a fireplace up there.'

Foley stood at the edge of the opening and looked down at the pigs. 'So tell me again. The two fellas in January charged in through your front door and fell straight down the open hatch. Right? They fell right down into the pigsty?'

When he got no answer Foley turned and his heart skipped a beat. Butts was standing perfectly still with an odd look on his face again. Just like he did yesterday. His eyes were wide and unfocussed. The same uncomfortable feeling washed over Foley and his instinct was telling him to call Guerin. But at the same time, he felt stupid. How could he be scared of a suspect that was half his size?

'Mr Butts.' It came out as a croak. 'I asked if they fell down into the pigsty.'

Butts didn't move. His eyes were fixed on the middle distance.

'Mr Butts.' Foley made it as sharp as his dry throat would let him. 'I want to know if they fell right down into the pigsty.'

Butts blinked and shook his head as if he'd just woken up. 'I don't know.' He licked his lips. 'I didn't look. I was too frightened. I was hiding under the table. I just wanted them to go away. I was frightened so I stayed where I was until the morning. When it got light I went down to see my pigs and there were bits of clothes all over the place. I felt sick. Do you know what could have happened to my pigs if they ate that stuff? They could choke. There were some huge bones, too. They could have made my pigs very sick. They could have died if they ate that kind of rubbish. I panicked and I gathered it all up. And I burnt it.'

'You burnt it all? Even the bones?'

'Yeah. I had to break some of them up first. I hammered them until they were very small.'

The big metal contraption that Foley had noticed the day before was standing up against the wall near the hatch. Foley took a closer look at it. The spikes were sharp enough to cause damage to anything falling on it. And there was a huge dark patch on the floor around it as if something had dripped off it. It was still sticky and smelled like the back of a butcher's shop.

'What's this?' Foley gave it a shake to check the weight of it.

'I don't know. It isn't mine. My father put it there. It's nothing to do with me. I don't know what it is.'

'So what do you use it for?'

'Nothing. I don't use it for anything. I never saw it before.'

Chapter 35

There was a loud yell and a splash from outside, followed by a string of angry curses. Foley ran to the door but stopped when he realized Butts was still standing over by the hatch.

'Mr Butts, come with me.'

Butts didn't move so Foley pulled the door opened and looked out. Guerin was lifting some sort of box up onto the wall. His wet hair was flat on his head and water dripped from his clothes.

'What are you doing, you eejit?' Foley laughed. 'This is not the time to go for a swim.'

Guerin wiped the wet from his face. 'I was only doing a bit of treasure hunting. And look what I found. I think you should ask Mr Butts to come over here and tell us all about it.'

A crash in the room behind him made Foley spin around and he caught sight of a pair of boots disappearing up the stairs to the top floor. He yelled at Guerin as he ran to the stairs, and he climbed them slowly and cautiously.

Butts was standing on a stool over by the fireplace and he was kissing the feet of a statue on the mantelpiece. 'I'm sorry, Holy Lady. Tell me what to do.'

Guerin appeared beside Foley and the pair of them stood still, unsure of what to do next.

As Butts turned around the fire cast a strange flickering shadow across his face and Foley knew he gasped and took a step back. The face was almost purple and the eyes seemed twice their size, sparkling with a strange green hue. The mouth opened and closed like a fish in a tank.

'The Lady sent them, you know.' The voice was deep, almost a growl. Foley sensed Guerin step back too. The truncheon in his hand was dripping water from his wet clothes.

'Mr Butts,' Guerin spoke in a surprisingly soft tone. 'Why did the Lady send them?'

'Because they're bad people. She sent them to be cleansed.'

'Oh right. So how many did she send here?'

Butts sneered and his eyes rolled up to the ceiling. 'How many what?'

'You said the Lady sent people here to be cleansed.'

Butts spread his hands. 'I did not. No one ever comes here. I never have people coming here. I live alone. I told you already. No one ever comes here. My Da won't let them. My Da won't let me have any friends because I might bring them here. He won't let anyone come here. My Da does not like people.'

'But the Lady sent them here anyway, didn't she?'

Butts glanced back at the statue. 'She wouldn't send them if my Da was here. It's only after he died...' Butts squeezed his eyes and his head rocked slowly. 'No one ever comes here.'

'So the people the Lady sends, did you think they were your friends?'

The eyes snapped open and the mouth did another series of fish moves. 'I did not. They're evil. They try to attack me. They come into my house and they try to rob me. They frighten me. But the Lady saves me. She tells me what to do.'

'What does she tell you to do?'

'Cleanse them.' Butts flew off the stool and shot across to the hatch, and he threw himself into the air with a mad scream. 'Like this.'

But Guerin moved even faster and grabbed him around the waist. And he carried him back across the room and threw him into the armchair. Butts wriggled and howled, his arms lashing out like a naughty child. Guerin slapped him across the face with the flat of his hand.

‘Stop it!’

Butts froze. He looked at Guerin like a startled rabbit. ‘You hit me.’

‘I need to know what the Lady told you to do, Mr Butts.’

Butts blinked several times trying to shake off the sting of the slap. ‘Cleansed them, she said. They’re evil. They’re maggots so they have to be cleansed. So I cleansed them.’

‘So she told you to cleanse them after they came here? But how did you get them to come here in the first place?’

Butts gave a soft smile that made him look even more like a child. ‘The Lady sent them to me.’

‘And did you know these people?’

‘I did not. The Lady chose them.’

‘And they just turned up here out of the blue?’

‘Not out of the blue. I told you. The Lady sent them to me. She chose them and she sent them to me.’

Guerin rubbed his fingers through his hair causing a spray of wet to hit Foley. ‘Mr Butts, I’m a bit confused here. So tell me, how does the lady choose the people to be cleansed and how does she make them come here?’

Butts pulled his knees up onto the chair and rested his chin on them. ‘When I take the pigs to market she points them out to me. I can spot them straight away. They look evil. They smell evil. They smell like maggots and they have no souls. Then she makes them follow me home.’

He gave another beaming smile and flicked his fingers as if he was playing the flute. ‘I’m like the Pied Piper, you know. Imagine I’m playing this beautiful music and they’re the rats and they’re following me home. Can you hear the music? Listen to the music. This little piggy went to the market. This little piggy followed me home. This little piggy fell down a crack. And this little piggy broke his back. And now they’re cleansed. The Lady is delighted. The Lady...’

Guerin clapped his hands and Butts flinched. ‘So you got them to follow you home. Tell me what happened next. You were expecting them to come into your house.’

Butts pointed at the hatch. ‘Oh I was, I was. So I push back the stairs, spread the rug over the hatch and put the mirror over there. It confuses them when they come in, you see? They spot me sitting in the chair and they rush over to me. And they drop straight down to Hell.’ The head rocked madly this time as the laugh came out like a shot. ‘Straight down to Hell. Straight down to Hell.’

Foley looked down the hole and pointed at the metal contraption. ‘So where does that thing come in?’

‘I can’t let my pigs eat stuff that might make them sick. The Lady told me how to catch them first. Then I strip them of anything that might harm my pigs.’

Foley felt the bile rise in his throat and he had to swallow it down before it choked him.

‘So how many people are we talking about, Mr Butts?’ Guerin used the soft voice again.

Butts hummed and looked into the distance again.

‘Mr Butts...’

‘What?’

'How many people came here?'

'No people came here. My Da won't let people come here. I told you. He won't let me have any friends.'

'Mr Butts, your neighbour Brendan Galvin came here searching for four men who were seen coming in here. What happened to them? Did you cleanse them too?'

Butts didn't respond. His eyes were glazed over again.

'Did Brendan tell you what those men did to his son?'

Again no reaction. Foley moved up beside him and leant on the arm of the chair. 'Do you know Brendan Galvin is going to lose his farm because he can't pay the rent? And he can't pay the rent because those men robbed his son of every penny they had. It was the money from the sale of the last bit of livestock they had to their name. That family gave the best years of their life to that farm. Mary is sick. And now they have nothing. You know that, don't you? Well, maybe you don't. Why should you? Anyway, without that money those men stole from them, they'll be thrown off the farm and they'll have nowhere else to go. They'll be forced to live on the streets.'

A tear sparkled in Butts' eye and he blinked it away. Then he got up and went across to the fireplace. And when he pressed a button on the side of the mantelpiece a panel popped open. Guerin moved up behind him as he turned around holding out a paper bag.

'Someone dropped this,' Butts said. 'I found it the night the neighbours came here looking for those four men.'

Guerin took it and checked what was inside. Then he passed it to Foley. Foley gave a sharp whistle. The bag was stuffed with pound notes.

'So where did this really come from, Mr Butts?'

'Where did what come from?'

'Mr Butts, please just tell...'

Butts pulled back the panel and let them see a line of paper bags on the shelf behind it. 'I put what I find into a separate bag every time I... well, just in case someone comes looking for them.'

Foley counted six more bags. 'So each bag is from someone you... cleansed? Is that what you're telling us? How many people did you cleanse exactly, Mr Butts?'

Butts shrugged and hopped up on the stool, and he reached out to the statue. 'The Lady sends them. I don't keep what I find. The Lady wouldn't like that. She just wants them cleansed, nothing else. She told me to put any money into a bag, and everything else into the box in the river.'

'And the bodies? What...'

'What bodies? What are you talking about?'

'Mr Butts, we have to know what exactly happened here. How many people came here? And when.'

Butts turned slowly on the stool and the distant look was back on his face again.

'Who're you talking to?'

'Mr Butts, we have to...'

‘But you can’t see me.’ This time the face was angelic, a beaming child’s face. ‘No one can see me. I’m not here. There’s no one here. The Lady said no one can see me now. So stop talking to me. You can’t see me.’

Guerin held out the handcuffs as he reached up and lifted Butts off the stool.

Chapter 36

Thomas Galvin was helping his mother in the vegetable patch at the back of the house. When he saw Foley approaching he stood up and leant on his shovel. Mrs Galvin stood up too and wiped her hands on her apron.

‘Good morning to you both.’ Foley held out the paper bag. ‘We found this near where you were attacked, Thomas. We believe it’s yours. I think you should count it to make sure it’s all there.’

Thomas looked at his mother and then at Foley, and he took the bag as if it was red hot. He glanced inside, gave a big smile and took it into the kitchen.

‘You caught those men, Guard Foley?’ Mrs Galvin put her hand on Foley’s arm and guided him towards the house. ‘You caught the men that robbed Thomas? So it’s true? Was there four of them?’

Foley patted her hand. ‘There were four of them all right, Mrs Galvin. But I’m afraid we didn’t catch them.’ He sensed her stiffen. ‘But I can give you my word they’ll not be bothering you again. They’re gone and they will not be coming back.’

‘There’s tea in the pot.’ Mrs Galvin grabbed some mugs and put them on the table in front of Foley. ‘Would you be wanting some, guard?’

‘I would indeed, Mrs Galvin. Thank you very much.’

Thomas had poured the money out onto the table and was counting it into neat piles. As his mother poured milk into the mugs he sat back and looked up at Foley. ‘This isn’t right. There’s too much money here. Mine was less than half of this. So it can’t be the money they took off me.’

Foley took out his notebook, flicked it open and pretended to check a page. ‘Well, it’s great to see such an honest man in this day and age, Thomas. But as far as the guards are concerned this is what was recovered from the area where you were attacked. So we’re assuming that it is all yours. So I’ll ask you to sigh for it here, please.’

Thomas blinked several times and touched the pile of notes. ‘I can’t ... what about the other people? Some of this money must belong to other people who were robbed by those men. It wouldn’t be right to keep it all.’

‘Thomas, can I just say that you are the only person to come forward and reported being robbed by those four men. So as far as we’re concerned this is the money they robbed from you. Which is why we’re now returning it to you.’

Thomas looked at his mother and when she nodded he took the pen from Foley and signed the book. ‘I don’t know what to say. Surely someone else must have been robbed for there to be so much money. I’m still not sure if it’s right to take it all.’

‘Well, they haven’t reported it so there’s no way of ever knowing where the rest of the money came from. Anyway, the investigation into the four men is ongoing,

and from my experience, it can take years for something as complicated as this to be resolved. Stuff like this can drag on and on and it might never be fully resolved anyway. So please, just accept the fact that we've returned your property to you.'

Thomas touched the money again. 'Thank you, guard. Thank you. And I'm sorry for what I said to you before. It's just that, well, I thought no one believed me. I was even doubting myself. Four men? It started to sound like I made it up to cover for being such a coward.'

'Oh, there were four of them all right. That much we do know. But that's all I can tell you about it for the time being.'

Mrs Galvin looked up when a shadow fell across the door. 'Brendan, you're home. Thank God. There's some great news. The guards have recovered our money. Isn't that wonderful?'

Brendan Galvin took off his cap and as he hung it on the back of a chair he put out his hand to Foley. 'You recovered our money? Holy Mother of God. I can't believe... so we're... this means we can pay the rent we owe? We don't have to pack up and leave? Oh my good God, that is wonderful news altogether. I don't know how we can ever thank you, Guard Foley. I have to say we'd given up all hope of you ever catching those feckin thugs, let alone recovering our money.'

Foley shook the hand then Brendan dropped into the chair next to his son. 'We are so grateful to you, Guard Foley. You're a life saver, that's what you are. A life saver. I don't know how we can ever thank you.'

'Well, contrary to popular belief we do follow up on the complaints we receive. Sometimes we hit a dead end, of course, but most times we have some good results to show for our hard work. And you have Thomas to thank for pointing us in the right direction.'

'So young Butts did have something to do with it after all?'

'Butts?'

'Yeah. The funny little fella over by the river. I saw you coming out of his house.'

'Good God, no. Mr Butts had nothing to do with it. Those four men went to rob him but he managed to hide. When they couldn't find him they left through the door at the bottom of the house. Which is why Thomas didn't see them coming out.'

Mrs Galvin poured tea into a cup in front of Brendan and he took a long swig from it. 'But you found our money in his house, did you?'

'We did. Those men were already arguing when they went into the house. And when they couldn't find Butts they started shoving and pushing each other before eventually leaving. We assume they dropped the bag of money during the scuffle.'

Brendan smirked and wiped his mouth. 'Young Butts told you all that, did he?'

'He did.'

'And you believe him, do you?'

Foley picked up his tea and sipped it. 'Well, actually I do. The thing is when those men raided his home Mr Butts believed they were going to hurt him to make him hand over his money. He was so distressed he suffered some sort of breakdown. Right now he's a nervous wreck and we can't get any sense out of him. So we've had to restrain him until we can get him back to Tralee. He's in a bad way and needs proper medical attention.'

‘Oh my God.’ Mrs Galvin clasped her hands under her chin. ‘The poor, poor man. Brendan, did you hear that?’

‘I did.’ Brendan put his mug down with a clunk. ‘And I’m very sorry to hear it. But he was always a strange young fella. I suppose living alone in that weird house with only his pigs for company... well, as I said, he was always a strange young fella. And now that his poor father is gone, God rest his poor soul...’

‘The poor, poor man,’ Mrs Galvin repeated. ‘What can we do for him, guard? Is there anything we can do for the poor fella?’

‘Well, now that you mention it, I was wondering if you could do us a couple of huge favours.’

‘Go on.’

‘How would you like to look after his pigs for a while?’

There was a stunned silence for a moment then Brendan gave a crooked grin. ‘You want us to look after his pigs? But what about...?’

‘He has no one else, I’m afraid. There was only him and his father. So if you could look after his pigs until he’s well enough to come home, you would be doing us a huge favour as well.’

Brendan gave a big smile and a resigned shrug. ‘And what’s the second favour?’

‘Could you take us to Tralee? We only have our bikes and if we take Mr Butts’ pony and cart there won’t be anyone to bring it back. We’ve already hitched it up ready to go.’

This time Brendan laughed out loud. ‘You finish your tea, Guard Foley, and I’ll go and change my boots.’

Chapter 37

As the pony clip-clopped around the corner of Carmady’s pub in Blennerville Foley became aware of Guerin glancing at him sideways with a grin on his face. He was about to respond when he noticed a small crowd of people over by the windmill. And even at this distance, he recognized the girl with the long red hair.

‘What’s going on over there?’ He tapped Brendan Galvin on the shoulder. ‘Stop, Brendan. Please.’

Brendan tugged on the reins and the pony automatically pulled into the kerb as Foley jumped down. ‘I’ll just take a look.’

‘And I’ll just sit here with the prisoner, is it?’ Guerin tried to flick him on the head but he missed. ‘Right outside a pub and I’m dying of thirst? You’re a bad man, Foley.’

‘I won’t be long.’

‘Of course, you won’t,’ Guerin laughed as he nodded at Eleanor Carmady.

Eleanor glanced around and when she saw Foley she ran to him and grabbed his hand.

‘Guard Eamon. Thank God.’

As Foley edged closer to the shadow of the windmill he felt the hairs on the back of his neck twitch. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s my brother. It’s Sean. He’s only gone and climbed up to the top of the friggin windmill and he says he’ll jump off if anyone goes near him.’

‘Oh, my God. Why?’

Eleanor shrugged and sobbed at the same time. ‘I don’t know. My Da followed him and he’s still up there.’

Guard Mitchell appeared and looked Foley up and down. ‘You’re a bit far from home.’

‘We’re just passing through, Tom. It’s a bit complicated and you have enough on your mind at the moment. So I’ll tell you later.’

Mitchell shielded his eyes and looked up at the figure whose legs were hanging out of an opening near the top of the largest windmill in Europe. ‘The poor lad. I wish I knew what was wrong with him.’

Eleanor took Foley’s hand and squeezed it against her chest. ‘Do something, Eamon. Please. Do something.’

For a moment Foley couldn’t think straight. He only ever imagined Eleanor standing this close to him in his dreams. Now she was leaning into him and he could feel her breath on his face. And he didn’t know how to tell her that he’d never been involved in anything like this before. He wasn’t even sure where to begin.

‘How did he get up there?’ was how it came out.

‘God knows,’ Mitchell said. ‘The place is on the verge of collapse, it’s been abandoned for so long. There are stairs going up to each floor but I wouldn’t risk climbing them. You can hear bits falling off it every day.’

‘Eamon, my Da is in there too. Can’t you do something?’ Eleanor squeezed Foley’s hand tighter.

‘So you have no idea why he’s so upset?’ Foley asked again.

‘No. He hasn’t been right for ages, though. My Da put it down to his age. But there’s something not right with him. Not for a while.’

‘And he hasn’t said why? He didn’t tell you what was bothering him?’

‘No. Well, he hardly ever speaks to us these days anyway. He comes home and that’s it. He probably wouldn’t tell us even if he was speaking to us. You know what young fellas are like.’

‘OK.’ Foley let go of Eleanor’s hand and straightened his jacket. And Guard Mitchell grabbed his arm. ‘Where are you going? You’re not thinking of going in there?’

‘I have to do something.’

‘No, you don’t. The fire brigade is on its way from Tralee. They’ll be here in a minute. Let them deal with it. They have the equipment. And the expertise.’

A man standing nearby turned and looked at them. When he looked at Eleanor his face changed and he looked away quickly. Foley thought he recognized the man but he couldn’t place him.

Then as the name Montague popped into his head the man walked over to him. ‘Can I have a quick word with you, guard?’

Foley followed the man away from the crowd. ‘I’m after remembering it,’ Montague said. ‘The thing I told you about? I’m after remembering it.’

‘About seeing someone in a white dress the night the young lad was killed?’

‘Yes. It was the hair, you see? It came to me just this minute. The hair was all wrong. That girl’s hair is long, right down her back. But the person I saw that night, well it was red alright but it was...’

He didn’t need to finish. Foley knew what he was going to say and he put up his hand. ‘Thank you, Mr Montague. That’s a great help. I can pass that on to Guard Mitchell. He’s dealing with the case right now. But in the meantime can I ask you to keep it to yourself for the moment. As it stands right now it could be very important, especially if the lad’s death becomes a murder investigation. You might be needed as a witness.’

‘What? Me? Why? All I said was I thought I saw someone in a dress.’

‘I know. But as I said, please don’t talk to anyone about it until we have the chance to find out exactly what happened.’ Foley took Montague’s hand and shook it, and Montague nodded several times before turning and walking away. Foley went back to Eleanor and she looked at him with eyes that were pleading. But she didn’t speak. Mitchell had gone around to the other side of the windmill. Foley gave a rumble of a grunt as he went over to the door and shoved it open.

‘Be careful, Guard Eamon,’ Eleanor called as he stepped inside.

Foley waved back, but he didn’t look at her.

Chapter 38

The inside of the windmill was darker and more ominous than Foley was expecting. And enormous. Dust floated in hazy sunbeams and everything groaned and grumbled. A couple of yards inside the door he had to stop and take a deep breath because his heart was thumping so hard. He was struggling to push the notion of being in the belly of the beast out of his mind. What was happening with Sean right now was too important to let his mind be gripped by strange imaginings. So he headed towards the rickety staircase that hugged the wall.

The first six slats were missing and huge gaps in the plaster showed where the railing had fallen away. Foley had to step up onto a broken chair and grab what was left of the bannister to pull himself up, shaking the dust from everything around him.

And the farther up he went the more depressing the huge cavern became. Every floor was littered with a dismal pile of broken machinery, big wheels, small wheels, rusty pipes. Thick layers of dust painted them all in the same grey despondency.

When he eventually got to the top level Eleanor’s father was sitting on a broken box with his head in his hands.

‘Mr Carmady, are you alright?’

Carmady jumped up and balled his fists. ‘What the hell are you doing here? For God’s sake, we told you to stay away. What do you think you’re doing? You’re a feckin guard. If you go anywhere near him he’ll throw himself out of the window. Back off.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Carmady, but I think I can help. Please. Let me talk to your son.’

'No.' Carmady jumped in front of Foley and put out his hands to block his way. 'He's not in the right state of mind to talk to anyone. Leave him alone. Just go away. I'll sort this out myself. I don't need you interfering.'

'Look, I think I know what's bothering him. Just let me speak with him and we can sort this out in no time.'

'What do you mean you know what's bothering him? How the hell would you know what's bothering my son?'

'Let me just speak to him ...'

'What is bothering him? Tell me.'

'I can't discuss that with you right now. It's personal. But I'm sure if Sean wants you to know he'll tell you himself. But I can't.'

'Don't get smart with me, you smug bastard. That's my son over there. I have a right to know what you know. Tell me what you know.'

'Mr Carmady, ask yourself this. When you were his age did you want your father to know stuff about you? You probably told your best friends things that you'd be mortified if your parents ever found out about. Not bad stuff. Just ordinary stuff young fellas get up to. But the stuff he thinks you won't understand.'

He edged past Carmady who didn't try to stop him this time. 'Listen, Mr Carmady. The fact is a young fella is more likely to open up to a stranger than he is to his own family. That's just the way it is. I've spoken to Sean before so I'm not a stranger, but it's the same thing.'

Carmady sniffed and turned away. 'So what do you want me to do?'

'Go down to your daughter and wait. Give me half an hour.'

Carmady was reluctant to go but eventually, he clattered down the stairs, calling out to his son but getting no answer.

As Foley got closer to him, Sean shuffled his legs that were hanging out of a small window. 'What do you want?' His voice was close to hysterical. 'I said no one was to come near me. If you come near me I'll...'

'You'll what, Sean?'

'I'll jump. That's what I'll do. I'll throw myself out of this window.'

'But why would you do that?'

'Because I... I'm warning you. I'll jump and it'll be all your fault. You'll be to blame if I kill myself.'

Foley put his hand on the frame around the window and leant out. And a dark shadow seemed to roll right up behind him and for a split second, it felt as if the windmill itself was going to shove him right out of the opening. He almost screamed as he threw himself back away from the edge. Sean turned with a startled yelp.

'What's wrong with you?'

'Oh, my Sweet Jasus. This is higher than I thought. I've gone all funny. How can you sit there like that? My legs have turned to jelly just looking at it.'

'Then why don't you just feck off. I told you not to come near me.'

Foley staggered over to a pile of timber and sat on it, and when it collapsed under him the noise it made was like gunfire as bits of wood clattered down through the gaps in the floor, hitting every level on the way down. Sean jumped and cursed out loud and Foley put his head in his hands. He could sense Sean glaring at him but he didn't look up. He felt too stupid. He sat on the floor and let

the silence hang between them for a minute before he shifted his position. 'No wonder your Da is upset, you coming up here in the first place,' Foley said through his fingers. 'You could have been killed just climbing up here. Did you see the cut of the place? If you fall from up here you'll break more than a fingernail. And how would your Da ever get over that? Losing his son would destroy him and that's for sure. And what about your sister? How would Eleanor feel if you killed yourself?'

'Eleanor.' The word was spat out. 'It's always about Eleanor, isn't it?'

'What is?'

'Everything. It's like the whole world spins around her. Everyone loves the beautiful Eleanor with her gorgeous hair and her big smile. There's not a man alive whose eyes don't light up when he sees her. I've seen how men look at her, even the auld married ones. Yeah, it's always about Eleanor.'

'Oh, right.' Foley shuffled closer. 'You surprised me there, Sean. I didn't realize all this was about your sister.'

Sean grunted and looked away, and the silence came again. Then Foley moved slightly closer. 'For some reason, I thought it was about Viktor Marks.'

Sean spun around and for a moment it looked as if he was going to throw himself at Foley. But he swore and sat back against the frame. His eyes were blazing with fury.

Foley stared back at him and after a few seconds, Sean turned away again.

'So am I right? Is this about what happened to Viktor?'

'What are you talking about? I don't know any Viktor.'

'Sean...'

'Feck off. I told you I don't know anyone called...'

'Sean, I'm not here to judge you.' Foley shuffled even closer. 'The only reason I'm here is that your father and your sister are worried sick about you. They're upset that you're upset enough to want to jump off a high building. They're upset that you're in such a state about something and they don't know what to do to help you.'

Sean buried his face in his hands and muttered something again that Foley couldn't understand.

Foley moved another inch closer and waited for a few moments as Sean mumbled behind his hands. 'So c'mon, Sean. Come back down and we can sort this out. C'mon.'

'No. I can't.'

'Why? What's so bad you want it to end this way?'

'You won't understand. No one will understand.'

'Then help me. Did something happen between you and Viktor? What made you fall out with him?'

'I told you already. Why are you talking about Viktor? You don't know anything about Viktor.'

'Sean, the lads on Viktor's ship said he always made you a cup of tea when you delivered the orders. From what they tell me he was a lovely fella. It was the kind of thing he would do.'

Sean gave an involuntary nod.

'And a cigarette. They said he gave you a cigarette too.'

Sean dropped his hands in his lap and rested his head back against the wall, and his face was still wearing the defensive mask.

'That was nice of him,' Foley said. 'I understand you don't get a cup of tea on any of the other ships.'

Sean cleared his throat. 'No. They take no notice of us. They sign for the delivery but we could have two heads for all they care. But he...'

Suddenly the sob came and he covered his face again. Foley rolled onto his knees, shuffled over to him and handed him a handkerchief. Sean grabbed it and blew his nose, and then clasped it in his hand.

'So the two of you were good pals?'

'I thought we were.' Sean rubbed his eyes with his fingers as he tried to hide the tears.

Foley let the silence hang there again but Sean still had the defiant look on his face and it dragged on.

'So what happened? Did you fall out? Why did you fall out, Sean?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me. So was there something going on between you two?'

'No. What do you mean was there something going on between us two? What are you saying? Are you saying we were...?'

'I'm saying did you fight? Did you and Viktor fight about something?'

Sean gave another sob but tried to mask it with a cough, and he bowed his head and didn't answer.

'Sean, we know you and Viktor were pals. And pals fall out. So what did you fall out over?'

Sean blinked and squeezed out a tear. 'I just... I got it all wrong. I was wrong from the start.'

'Wrong about what?'

'You wouldn't understand. No one will understand. That's why I'd be better off dead.'

'Sean, I told you already. No matter how bad things seem right now, they are not bad enough to die over. You have to think about your family. Think about how upset they'll be if they lose you like that.'

'It's my family I'm thinking about. It's the shame I'm thinking about. I'd rather die than have them find out about me.'

'No Sean. The people who love you will understand. They'd rather you were alive. They'll understand.'

'They won't.' Sean leant over the edge and Foley gasped.

'Sean, they will. I promise you. Your family love you very much. They'll understand.'

Sean's whole body was shuddering and his hand trembled as he gripped the window frame. 'How will they understand? I made a complete fool of myself. I really thought ... well, it turned out it was all in my head. It was all in my stupid imagination.'

The sobs turned the rest of it into a mumble. Foley sat back on his heels and took out a cigarette. He lit it and handed it to Sean, but Sean waved it away. Foley took a long drag on his as he waited for Sean to continue, but Sean seemed lost in his thoughts.

‘So tell me how you two first met.’

Sean looked annoyed at the question and grimaced as he considered his answer. But then his face softened a little.

‘He was by the gangway when I brought the deliveries on board. He was nice, you know, smiling and friendly. And he handed me the cigarette he was smoking. I don’t smoke but I took it anyway. I don’t know why. And I nearly choked on it. He laughed out loud and patted me on the back. Then he brought me a cup of tea. And we had a good laugh about it. His English was terrible and that made it even funnier because we made up our own sign language.’

He pressed the handkerchief to his eyes and his shoulders rocked again. ‘Then I saw him in town. He had a day off so we just strolled around the place. Then we went to the café in Quilter’s and had a cup of tea and a sandwich. We had a nice day so we met up again when I had my half day. Which was every Wednesday.’

‘So where did that ring come into it? The one you took from the odd box?’

Sean’s face clouded again and he looked away. ‘Viktor saw one in a window and he pointed at the stones on it and then pointed at my eyes. I thought he said beautiful eyes and it made me go all funny inside. It was the way he looked at me that made me want to buy it for him. But it was too expensive. I couldn’t afford that. Then I remembered the ring in the odd box. But when I gave it to him he... I don’t know. He took it but he didn’t react like I was expecting him to. He said he liked it, yes. But there was something wrong with the way he said it. I felt disappointed. I thought he...’

Another sob and he wiped the dribble from his chin. ‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter now, does it?’

Foley blew smoke down his nose as he waited for the sobs to stop again.

‘Did you meet Viktor on Monday night, Sean? Was he in your Da’s pub? Did you meet him?’

Sean sat up again and leaned his head back against the frame. ‘I knew he was there. There’s a small window at the top of our stairs and you can see down into the bar. You can’t see the window from the bar because it’s tiny and it looks like a gap in the rafters. Anyway, I saw him drinking his pint. I could see him looking around and I thought he was looking for me, but...’

More tears came and he brushed them away.

‘Eleanor?’

This time the sob was loud and long and his head nodded angrily. ‘I know that now. But at the time... God, I feel so feckin stupid. I feel like a filthy maggot. My life is just one big pile of shit. I’m a disease, that’s what I am. I’d be better off throwing myself out of here right now and get it over with.’

‘No.’ Foley tried to keep his voice soft and calm. ‘Nothing is ever that bad, Sean. What’s so bad you want to kill yourself over?’

‘Everything. I ruined everything. I thought me and him were... I thought... but it was all in my feckin filthy mind.’

Sean’s head jerked so hard it hit the window frame and stunned him. As he grabbed his head he wobbled towards the edge of the window. Foley dived and caught a fistful of his sleeve, and he had to jam his legs against the wall below the window to stop both of them from toppling out. He had to use every bit of strength he could muster to drag Sean back into the room. When he was far enough away

from the window he let the boy fall onto his back where he groaned and sobbed at the same time.

‘All right, Sean. It’s all right now. You’re safe.’ Foley knelt down beside him and patted him on the shoulder. ‘Just relax. Everything is going to be all right.’

Sean flung his arms out and grabbed at the air. ‘He shouldn’t have come to our Mass on Sunday. He never came to our Mass before. Everything would have been all right if he hadn’t come to our Mass. Why did he have to come to our Mass? And he didn’t even look at me. He couldn’t take his eyes off of Eleanor and it was like I wasn’t even there. I felt sick. It was like I was stabbed in the heart with one of Jackie Maher’s big knives. I felt sick and angry and bitter. I felt betrayed. I thought he looked at me like that once. Now I realized how wrong I was.’

He rolled onto his side and curled up into the fetal position. Foley sat back against the wall. ‘So Eleanor was wearing her white dress on Sunday? The day Viktor went to your Mass?’

Sean nodded.

‘So what were you thinking when you put it on?’

Chapter 39

‘What? What are you talking about?’

‘Sean, I know all about it. You were seen.’

‘No, no, no.’ Sean pressed his hands between his legs and his head rolled from side to side. ‘Then tis all over. Everyone will hate me now. I can’t go on like this. I can’t live knowing they’re laughing at me, mocking me. I can’t live like this.’

‘Sean, only me and the person who saw you know about the dress. And he won’t say anything because he thought it was Eleanor. So your Da will never know. I was just wondering why you were wearing it, that’s all. What were you trying to do?’

I asked myself that a million times already. All the time I was watching Viktor I was getting more and more angry. I wanted to go down and scream at him. I wanted to hurt him, hit him and hurt him like he’d hurt me. But I also wanted him to look at me the way he looked at my sister. Especially when she was wearing that dress. That feckin perfect dress.’

‘So you put it on to get his attention?’

Sean made a noise deep in his throat. ‘I don’t know. I feel sick just thinking about it. It was as if I couldn’t control what I was doing. I was so desperate for him to notice me I would have done anything. And I felt strange, as if I detached, looking down at this young fella putting on his sister’s dress. I knew I should stop him before he made a complete eejit of himself, but I didn’t know how to. It was like watching a film through thick smoke. I can’t even remember leaving the house. All I remember is waiting for him on the other side of the bridge. There was a full moon and I could see him coming towards me. I don’t even know what I expected him to do. Did I want him to... I don’t know. I really don’t know. But I know now it was a stupid thing to do to him. I can’t believe I was standing there

wearing a dress. I'm such an eejit. Then I knew what a huge mistake it was because he...'

'He what, Sean?'

'He hesitated when he saw me and I swear I saw him smile. I wanted to run to him and hold him, that's all. Just hold him, pretend we... then a man appeared behind us and lit a pipe. Viktor stepped back into the shadow and I did too. I could hear his breathing. And feel the heat from his face near mine. But suddenly a truck appeared and the headlights landed on us. They lit us up. The man with the pipe looked straight at us then turned and walked away. Then Viktor looked at me. And the look on his face... I will never forget the look on his face. It was not nice. He jumped back as if he'd smelt something disgusting. Then he turned and walked away too. He looked so angry. I ran after him and tried to talk to him. I wanted to explain. I didn't mean to upset him. I was sorry. But he wouldn't stop. He pushed me away and kept on walking towards Tralee. I was so desperate to explain myself that I grabbed his arm to make him listen. But he started screaming at me. I don't know what he was saying but I could guess. Anyway, his arms were flying all over the place and his roaring terrified me. I thought people would hear him and come out to see what was going on so I tried to put my hand over his mouth. But he punched me in the face and I fell back into the road. He was still roaring and shouting at me. As I got back up there was a lump of wood on the ground.'

He gulped and gave a dry cough.

'I just wanted to shut him up. Why wouldn't he just shut up? His face was all puffed up and he looked like he was going to punch me again, so I swung at him with the piece of wood. There was a terrible crack and he fell back onto the wall. And he just lay here. I knew from the way his head was turned that it wasn't good, and I just froze. I stood there for ages. I didn't know what to do. I was wearing a dress, for feck sake. How could I risk going for help dressed like that? Everyone would know what a twisted little maggot I was.'

'What? So you just left him there? You didn't try to help him?'

Sean shook his head. 'I tried to lift him back onto his feet but I knew it was too late already.'

'How?'

'For God's sake! I just knew. I could tell by the cut of him. His eyes were unfocused and he was limp.'

'That doesn't mean he was dead.'

'He was dead. I know when something is dead. I work in a butcher's shop. I help to slaughter animals. Viktor was dead.'

'Then how did he get over the wall into the mud? He was inside the wall when he was found.'

'I put him there.'

'How? You couldn't lift him on your own.'

'Of course, I could. I can carry a whole animal carcass on my shoulder. We're trained on how to lift a whole cow's carcass and carry it to the freezer. It helped that Viktor was on the wall. It made it easier to heft him up.'

'But why didn't you just leave him where he was?'

'I panicked. I could see more vehicles coming along the road from Tralee and I didn't want them to see him. I needed time to get home and get out of the stupid dress. Sheer panic gave me the strength to lift him, climb up onto the wall and lob him into the mud. Then I ran.'

He let his head fall back onto the floor. Foley sat back too. 'So why didn't you just come and tell us this? It would have saved us a lot of time and effort. If it happened as you said then you didn't mean to kill him. It was an accident. So if you had come to us straight away...'

'How could I? How could I tell anyone I was...? They lock people up for being like that. It's against the law. And I'd be excommunicated from the Church too. How could I tell anyone? I was too ashamed. I was dirty, evil in the eyes of the world. And I know it's a terrible thing to say—God forgive me—but when I realised he was dead I was relieved. Now I wouldn't have to face him again. My dirty secret died with him. No one would ever know about it now.'

And at that moment every bit of sympathy Foley had for Sean Carmady evaporated. What he saw instead was a selfish and callous young man trying to justify his actions. He claimed to have feelings for Viktor, yet not once did he show signs of contrition about what he did to him. It was all about Sean, how he was feeling and how hurt he was because he was rejected. Wanting to kill himself had nothing to do with Viktor. It was because of his shame about his preferred choice of friendship. It was the horror of being found out.

But he was Eleanor's brother, and Foley knew he had to try to save him from himself. He held out his hand. 'Look, Sean. As I said, if what you're telling me is true then it was an accident. Just a horrible accident. So come back down with me right now and we can sort it all out. Your Da and your sister are waiting for you down there.'

'I can't.' Sean pushed the hand away. 'How can I face them ever again?'

'Yes, you can.'

'But when they see you arresting me they'll want to know what I did and you'll have to tell them. Then it'll all come out in court and they'll be ashamed of me for the rest of their lives.'

'I'm not arresting you, Sean. Guard Mitchell will want to talk to you, though. He might have to charge you with attempting suicide but he'll appoint a solicitor who will advise you on how to answer the charge. As for what happened to Viktor, I'll have to make a statement repeating what you told me today. But again you'll have a solicitor who will advise you on how to respond to that too. But right now you need to come down from here. C'mon, your Da is waiting. What do you say?'

'I can't. I told you, I can't go on like this. I'd be better off dead.'

'Please, Sean. No matter how bleak things are looking at the moment, dying is not the answer. Come down and we can talk about it. We can sort it out. Think of the people who love you. Together we can help you.'

Sean squeezed his eyes shut and nodded, then he sat up very slowly. He rolled onto his knees and took a deep breath, spreading his arms out in front of him.

Then he gave a mad shriek and sprang to his feet, and he charged towards the window. Foley threw out his hand and slapped his ankle, causing him to stumble. But before Foley could get up on his feet Sean lashed out and kicked him just above the knee. Foley collapsed in an awkward heap but still managed to grab a

fistful of Sean's trousers and pull him backwards. Sean howled and cursed as he threw punches at Foley's head, making him cower. But Foley refused to let go and Sean turned in a violent circle and tried to wrestle Foley's hand away. Eventually, he grabbed Foley's neck in a stranglehold. But Foley was stronger and he lifted him off his feet then dropped him. Sean hit the floor with a thud. Foley rolled him onto his face and pulled his hands behind his back, and as he tried to get his handcuffs out of his pocket he suddenly felt as if he was in a boat. The whole world seemed to sway under his feet and he threw himself back against the wall.

'Holy shit. Sean, get up. Get up now!'

Planks of wood on the floor began to rattle and creak and a big lump of machinery slid towards them. Then with a sickening grumble, the wood snapped and the machine dropped down through the gap with an almighty crash, smashing through the floor below and sending a cloud of dust swirling up the hole. Foley grabbed Sean and dragged him across to the stairs which were already shuddering.

But Sean turned so suddenly and shoved Foley away that Foley lost his footing and tumbled down the stairs. He felt his head scrape along the old wall causing flashes of light and sharp pain. Instinctively he grabbed at whatever was near and he managed to catch hold of the railing that snaked along the inside of the stairs. It stopped him from falling further but it also jerked the wind out of him. For a moment he thought his arms had come out of their sockets. It was excruciating just holding on.

And through the pain, he heard Sean howling. He looked behind but he couldn't see anything, just a thick cloud of dust swirling across the massive space. Then a shadow danced across the strips of light that came in through the gaps in the roof. It looked out of proportion, elongated and misshapen, arms and legs flicking and waving. And the noise it made was in motion with the groaning of the splintering wood.

Then there was a roar like thunder and the whole building shook as the top-level crumbled and crashed down onto the one below. That floor held for less than a heartbeat then folded in on itself too.

Foley knew he screamed as he felt the stairs drop from under him and he struggled to hold on to the railing. But very quickly the railing pulled away from the wall and sent him swinging down into the thick wall of dust and flying splinters. He hit something that stopped his fall. It was another section of the stairs. He froze, too frightened to move in case he caused it to collapse like the rest of the structure.

He gave it a couple of minutes before he eased himself up into a sitting position, groaning in agony at the pain that ripped through him. It felt as if every bone in his body was cracked. He looked around and he was amazed at the carnage, the enormous pile of broken wood and twisted machinery that seemed to fill the whole building. The noise had subsided and an eerie silence took its place.

Every bit of his head was stinging. When he wiped his face with his sleeve he was stunned by the amount of blood that came away on it. He touched it with his fingers and he could feel flaps of skin hanging loose. He knew he had to stop the bleeding so very slowly he undid his jacket and started to unbutton his shirt. He would wrap it around his head and tie it in place with the sleeves.

To steady himself he reached out to the strip of railing that was still fixed to the wall above his head. Which was lucky. Because as soon as he stood up the stairs dropped away again and for a second time he yelped in pain as his arms jerked the wind out of him.

This time he couldn't hold on. His hands slipped off the rail and he slid down the wall, bouncing on every lump that stuck out of it.

When he hit the ground it wasn't as hard as he was expecting. Rubble and lumps of wood broke his fall, but he was still too stunned to move. He could see shadows coming in through the door. Voices were calling to him. Then he was pulled through the dust and dragged out the door into the glaring sunlight.

Chapter 40

Vicky McCarthy recognized the knock on the front door and she was smiling as she opened it. The big Polish seaman bowed his head and handed her a paper bag.

'Stefan, I wasn't expecting you today. Come in, come in.'

Vicky took a quick peek in the bag. Tea, sugar, and some loose biscuits. She went into the kitchen and pushed the kettle onto the hot plate on the range, then she put the bag on the table. And when she looked back at Stefan her stomach gave a nervous flutter. His face was serious and his hands were joined in front of him as he stood by the door. For as long as she could remember Vicky hated it when people had a serious face on them. It made her anxious.

'Are you all right, Stefan?'

The big Pole nodded but he couldn't look her in the eye. Instead, he shuffled over to the table and waited for her to ask him to sit down, and the chair creaked when he lowered himself onto it.

'So, do you want a cup of tea?'

Stefan nodded and ran his finger around the inside of his shirt collar. 'Thank you. But only if you're making one already.'

'So, have you got a day off today?'

'I have the afternoon off. And I came here because I have something to say to you.'

Vicky went to the cupboard, got two cups and put them down on the table harder than she intended.

Stefan moved one of them closer to himself. 'I wanted to say this to you before but I don't know how to. It is not easy because, well, I do not know the words. Do you understand?'

Vicky nodded and went back to the range. As she spooned tea into the teapot she tried not to show her disappointment. This kind of conversation was always about disappointment. She braced herself for what was coming and turned to face him. 'Go on, Stefan. Please. Just say what you have to say.'

Stefan blinked and straightened his tie. 'Well, I told you that in Poland there is nothing for me, yes? There was no one for me. I have no home, no family, no relatives.'

Vicky gave a nod as she rubbed the scar on her face. 'Yes. You told me all that.'

Stefan ran his fingers around his collar again. 'Well, as you know the war is changing now. And it looks like the Germans are almost driven from Poland already. So very soon my country will be free again. It will be safe to go home once more.'

He paused, watching Vicky for a reaction. She didn't speak. She couldn't.

'The thing is, some of the crew, some of my friends, are talking about taking the ship back home. They are very homesick so they are very excited to go home too.'

Again the pause. Vicky rubbed her hands in her apron. 'Well, that's understandable. Of course, it is, Stefan. Most people want to go back to where they call home. I know I would. I love Ireland. And I imagine you love Poland just as much.'

'Yes, very much.'

'And what you're trying to say to me is you want to go home.'

'Yes. I would like to go home very much. I have beautiful memories of my home, my people, places where I grew up. Poland is in my blood.'

Vicky turned away and poured the hot water into the teapot. 'So when... how soon will you be leaving us?'

Stefan didn't answer, and when Vicky looked around his head was bowed and his hands were clasped in his lap. She waited a moment before she spoke again. 'Stefan?'

His head jerked up and his mouth opened and closed as if he couldn't get the word out. Vicky felt a surge of sympathy for him. She realised her sharp reaction was making him very uncomfortable. She pulled in her stomach and forced a smile.

'So when will you be going home?' she asked in as light a voice as her heavy heart would let her.

Again Stefan seemed to struggle with the words and his Adam's apple flicked up and down several times. 'I very much want to go home. I love Poland. But I also like very much being here. Being with you. Here. In this town where you are.'

Vicky shrugged. 'That's very nice of you to say so, Stefan. And can I say it's very nice having you here too?'

She put the teapot and a bottle of milk on the table. Then she shook a few biscuits out of the bag onto a plate and put them in front of Stefan. He picked one up and looked at it with a faraway gaze as Vicky poured the tea.

There was so much Vicky wanted to say to the big seaman but she was afraid of the reaction she might get from him. Sometimes it was best to say nothing, just let the situation flow on to its natural conclusion. So she sat down, picked up her mug and held it in her hands. But Stefan still had his head down and she couldn't stand the silence. She had to fill it.

'I expect all your mates are looking forward to going home.'

Stefan glanced up for a moment then examined the biscuit again. 'Not all of them,' he said. 'Some of them will stay here. They have made a new life for themselves here. They have many friends here. And one of them is going to marry a girl from this town. So not all of them will be going home with the ship.'

Vicky nodded and sipped her tea. Again the awkward silence provoked her into speaking. 'But you will be going, I suppose.'

This time he sat up and took a deep breath. 'That will depend on you.'

His eyes held Vicky's and it took a moment for her to realize what he was saying to her. She put her mug down and straightened up. 'On me? Why does it depend on me?'

'I love Poland, yes. And one day I will go back there. But right now I would prefer to be here, in Tralee, where you are. So whether I go home with my ship will depend on what you... how you will... if you would prefer me to stay.'

He put his hand in his pocket and took out a small box, and suddenly he was down on one knee and holding it out to her. 'Vicky, I would be very happy if you would do me the honour of becoming my wife.'

He opened the box and held it out to her. Vicky jumped up so suddenly her chair flew backwards with a crash. Stefan pulled back too and stood up.

'Sorry. I am so sorry. I have upset you. I am so sorry. I did not mean...'

Vicky reached the sink and gripped the side of it, and she gave a huge sob. Then she turned and practically ran to Stefan, and she took his hand in both of hers. 'Oh Holy Mother of God, of course, I will marry you, you big lummo. Oh my God... yes, yes. I will. Oh my God...'

As Stefan slipped the ring on her finger Vicky felt a sudden cold reality take hold of her and she backed away.

'Stefan, are you sure about this? Have you thought it through? You know I have children? Five children? Are you aware of what you'll be taking on? Do you realize what it means?'

Stefan put out his huge arms and went over to her, and he wrapped her in a tight embrace that puffed the wind out of her. Then he kissed her on the lips.

Chapter 41

Eamon Foley was surprised when they got him out of his hospital bed, sat him in a wheelchair and rolled him down the corridor into a waiting room. He was even more surprised to find the Super and Sergeant Fitzgerald sitting there with two men in suits. They all stood up as Foley was parked in the middle of the room by a nurse who then hurried out.

'Good God, look at the cut of you. You look dreadful.' Sergeant Fitz went to shake his hand but couldn't decide which bandaged limb to grab. 'How are you feeling? Or is that a stupid question?'

'Not as bad as I look,' Foley mumbled through battered lips. 'Ask me again when the pain killers wear off.'

'Well, as far as I'm concerned you're a complete fool,' the Super growled. 'You risked your life trying to save someone who didn't want to be saved. Absolute madness. You could have been killed too. Or worse still, you could have been crippled for life.' He glanced back at Sergeant Fitzgerald. 'However, it seems your colleagues don't agree with me. Guard Mitchell and Guard Guerin think you're some sort of hero and you should be recommended for a medal.'

Foley's mouth was throbbing from his effort to speak and he pressed a bandaged hand against it. He tried to ask how Sean Carmady was doing but it

came out as another long mumble. Sergeant Fitz seemed to catch the words and he shook his head.

‘Not good news, I’m afraid. They got him out all right but he was in a bad way. He didn’t make it to the hospital.’

Foley’s heart sank. He wished to God he’d never gotten involved in the first place. Why didn’t he just mind his own business and drive on? Now he’d be held responsible for what happened and whatever chance he had with Eleanor was well and truly ruined. This had put a huge wedge between them because every time they met it would remind Eleanor of her brother. And Eleanor would remind Foley of a tormented boy he couldn’t save. If Foley hadn’t gone into the windmill Eleanor could have lost her father as well, but what kind of consolation was that?

‘At least the family was there to say their final goodbye,’ Sergeant Fitzgerald continued. ‘They’re distraught. They want to know if he said anything to you about why he was up there in the first place. Did he tell you what was troubling him?’

‘He was sorry.’ Foley gave an exasperated wave of his hand. He didn’t want to get into a conversation about the real reason Sean was acting so strange because he wasn’t sure how he was going to tell it in his report. It was too raw and delicate right now. Too many people were going to be devastated when they discover Sean was the killer of Viktor Marks, accidentally or not. Foley needed more time to choose the right words. ‘He was coming down.’

The Super growled again. ‘As I said, a bloody stupid thing to do.’ He turned to the men in suits and flicked his head at them. ‘Anyway, Guard Foley, these gentlemen are detectives from Dublin. They would like to know why you were asking about Inspector Edge yesterday.’

‘What? He’s my step-father.’ Foley felt something wet on the corner of his mouth.

The Super glanced at the suits who didn’t respond. ‘Right. But he’s with the Limerick Gardaí. What was he doing in Tralee?’

‘In court.’ The pain made Foley’s answers sharp and angry. ‘Surely you knew that?’

The Super snarled and looked as if he was going to say something else but one of the suits put his hand up. ‘So did he come to see you while he was here?’

‘He stayed with us.’ Foley wiped the wet from his mouth with his sleeve.

‘So you had a grand auld chat with him, I suppose. You being a guard too I expect you had a long discussion about what you both were up to these days. You know the sort of thing? The usual everyday banter between father and son, guard to guard.’

Foley shifted in his seat and made the wheelchair wobble. ‘No. We didn’t.’

‘Guard Foley, it’s very important that we know why Inspector Edge was really in Tralee.’ The Super interrupted. ‘We need to know what he told you about his visit.’

The suit put his hand up again. ‘Guard Foley, did you ever hear Inspector Edge mention a couple called Seamus Cassidy and his wife Alex?’

‘Alex?’

‘You know her?’

Foley shrugged. ‘A few years ago. She rented a room in our house.’

‘Oh? So the Cassidys rented a room on your house?’

‘No. Just her. Alex.’

‘And her husband? Where was he?’

Foley shook his head. ‘She never mentioned a husband.’

The suit studied Foley for a few moments then pulled a face. ‘So she was on her own when she rented a room in your house?’

Foley nodded again.

‘So when did you last see her?’

‘She went home... maybe three years?’

‘And you haven’t seen her since?’

‘No.’

‘What about Inspector Edge. Did he know her?’

‘It’s his house. He rented the room to her.’

‘So when you were having your cosy chat with the inspector did he happen to mention seeing her recently?’

Foley snorted and looked away.

The Super moved closer and towered over the wheelchair. ‘Look Foley, it’s very important you tell us if Inspector Edge knew the Cassidys were here in town.’

Foley snapped up straight. ‘I already told you. He did not.’ Red spittle flew out with the words. ‘Why are you asking me all this? Has something happened to Liam Edge?’

The Super looked at Sgt Fitzgerald who cleared his throat. ‘Look Foley, I’m afraid we have some bad news for you. Inspector Edge is dead.’

‘Oh my God.’ Foley felt his whole body buckle and he had to force himself not to fall out of the wheelchair. ‘What happened to him?’

‘There was an incident in the town,’ Fitz continued. ‘Shots were fired and four people died from their wounds. Two detectives and both Cassidy and his wife.’

Foley groaned and covered his face.

‘It seems that Inspector Edge died from a heart attack during the incident,’ the Super said in an officious voice. He could have been addressing a stranger. ‘As Sergeant Fitzgerald said, we’re very sorry for your loss. I know it’s a great shock and I’m sorry you had to find out like this. If you need a moment to yourself we can continue this later. Do you want a cup of tea? A cigarette?’

Foley shook his head. ‘Just tell me what happened.’

The suit took out a notebook and studied it for a moment. ‘I’m afraid all we can tell you right now is that Seamus Cassidy and his wife were wanted in Dublin for the murder of Mr Cassidy’s brother. Detectives Lane and Grey, the detectives who were shot, were involved in the original hunt for them. But when the trail went cold both the Detectives transferred to Limerick.’

He tapped his notebook and looked at Foley with cold eyes. ‘So what we’re trying to establish is how the Cassidys and Detectives Lane and Grey all appeared in Tralee at the same time? Is it just a coincidence? Or did they know the Cassidys were in town and used the court case as an excuse to come to Tralee? If so, what happened? And what was Inspector Edge’s part in it? Did he go with the detectives to their house to arrest the Cassidys?’

He looked at Foley as if he was waiting for an answer. And it was just as well that Foley couldn’t speak because his own questions would have poured out of him. Who was this woman who was claiming to be Alex Cassidy? It wasn’t the Alex

Cassidy he knew all those years ago. He was certain of that. He'd seen the body of that Alex Cassidy in the morgue.

And why did Edge bring this woman to the house? His own house, where Vicky and her children lived. Where Foley and his son lived. What in God's name was he thinking? Did he know she was wanted for murder? Was it anything to do with the court case? Foley knew the Super should be told about this, but right now it was just too messy. He'd need time to decide what was safe to tell them and what was best left alone.

'We were hoping you might know something about his movements, where he went, who he met,' the suit continued.

'No. He was in court. That's all I know.' Foley licked his lips and tasted something bitter. 'He would never do anything without authorization. He would never risk...'

'Well, he did. A witness saw him in Ash Street following a woman. Lane and Grey were also seen in the Green watching someone as well. So we're assuming they knew where the Cassidys were and they went in to arrest them. But obviously, something went wrong. The neighbours called the guards when they heard gunshots.'

Foley groaned and he had to force himself to not be sick. An awkward silence hung over them for a moment then Sgt Fitzgerald put his hand on Foley's shoulder. 'Look, we understand how upsetting this is for you. But you know how these investigations go. We need as much information as possible to piece together exactly what happened. We owe it to everyone involved to know why they died. We owe it to Inspector Edge, to the detectives and their families. And you know how essential time is. The sooner we have answers the sooner we can establish what happened. So if you do remember anything that Inspector Edge might have said, anything at all, please tell us.'

'What about my mother? Have you told my mother?'

Sergeant Fitzgerald stepped back and looked at the Super who shrugged. This time Foley couldn't stop the sick coming up and it shot out across the floor. And all four men danced out of the way and cursed loudly.

Chapter 42

'All right, call the nurse,' Sergeant Fitz barked. 'We'll have to do this another time. Get him back to his bed. He's not up to this.'

The suit rushed over and grabbed the handles of the wheelchair. 'I'll take him,' he said as he steered Foley out into the corridor and headed towards the ward.

When they came to an open door the suit wheeled Foley out onto a patio and took out a packet of cigarettes. He lit one and put it in Foley's mouth.

'Can I say again how sorry I am for your loss, Guard Foley?' He nodded respectfully but his face was hard to read. His eyes were dark and intelligent. Foley nodded back.

'Thank you, ah...?'

'Paul.'

'I'm Eamon.'

'I know. You're a Tralee fella, I understand. Born and bred.'

Foley grunted as he eased the cigarette out of his mouth with his two exposed fingers.

'I thought I'd give you a little bit of good news, for what it's worth.' The suit flicked the lighter several times then put it back in his pocket. 'There's a reward out on the Cassidys and your Super is claiming it on behalf of the three lads that died, Inspector Edge and Detectives Lane and Grey. It will be split between them and given to their wives. Possibly with a medal.'

Foley forced a smile. 'For what it's worth.'

'The thing is, I get the impression you're holding something back from us, Guard Foley. I can't help feeling you know a little bit more about what Inspector Edge was up to. But for some reason, you don't want to share it with us. Why would that be?'

Foley sucked on the cigarette, ignoring the sting from his swollen lips. 'Rubbish.'

'No. I don't think so. I'm a good detective, Guard Foley. I have been a good detective for many years. And I'm a good detective because I'm blessed with the gift of reading faces. Even ones as battered as yours. Every little flicker of the eyes or the clamp of the jaw tells me a story. The face paints a picture and I can read that picture. So I know instantly when someone is ... well, not lying, exactly. More like evading the question. You see, it's not about what is said. It's about what isn't said that makes me curious.'

Foley shrugged.

'Look, let me tell you a few things about the Cassidys, Guard Foley. First of all, they stole something very valuable from a man who has enormous influence in Ireland. He is not a nice man at the best of times. Then Seamus killed his own brother Tommy and disappeared with the stolen item.'

He sneezed and rubbed his eyes. 'Now according to you, Alex Cassidy came to Tralee around that time. Without her husband? Why was that? Which one of them had the stolen item, do you think?'

Foley flinched and instantly pretended something got in his eye. Joe Jnr was searching for something in Foley's room, the room Alex once lived in. So this is what he was looking for. Dear God, how did he even know about it? Because the woman who said she was Alex Cassidy told him? But how was Liam Edge involved? Did he just happen to be in Tralee at the same time as this woman? Foley never believed in coincidences. Edge must have known Alex was in town. He must have been part of some sort of covert operation sent to capture her. But if it was an authorized operation why did the Dublin detectives not know about it?

Now the big question is—what happened to the stolen item? If the woman did recover it from the house, surely the detectives would have found it by now? Is that why Edge was following her, to take it off her? He was acting strange ever since he got to town. But how likely was that? The more Foley tried to unpick the mess the more scrambled it became. It was looking far worse than he could ever have imagined.

The detective slapped his hands together. 'So you see the problem, don't you, Eamon. The person the Cassidys stole the item from wants it back. It's been

missing for too long and he's not very happy about it, as you can imagine. He put a load of pressure on the Gardaí top brass and they cascaded it down to the troops. Several heads have rolled and a lot of reputations have been ruined because of it. And just to let you know, people are still looking for it. So it would be in your interest to share what you know with us. There are some hard people involved in this. And I promise you it is not wise to go up against them. Do you understand what I'm saying? Don't put yourself in danger over it. Don't put your family in danger over it. Tell us what you know and we'll deal with it. All right?

He took the handles and turned the wheelchair back towards the door. 'So go and get some rest now, Guard Foley. And think very carefully about your predicament. You know where to reach me when you've made up your mind. But don't take too long. Because I promise you, this is not over.'

