

Rock Point

Sharpe & Donovan, prequel

by Carla Neggers, 1958–

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Chapter 1

In all his travels, Finian Bracken had never been to America. London, Paris, Rome, Prague, Amsterdam, Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, even Moscow...but never New York City, San Francisco or Dallas. Certainly not Rock Point, Maine, where portly, thoughtful Father Joseph Callaghan served a struggling parish. Finian was a priest himself. His days of rushing from airport to airport, hotel to hotel, seemed distant, as if it had been a different man and not him at all. He didn't know if he'd ever leave Ireland again. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

He and his friend Sean Murphy, a preoccupied garda detective if ever there'd been one, had happened upon the American priest in the bar lounge of the lovely O'Byrne House Hotel in Declan's Cross, a tiny village on the south Irish coast.

Father Callaghan had explained he was winding down a month-long visit to Ireland and didn't want to go home. He said he was captivated by the land of his ancestors. *Father Joseph*, he called himself. Finian doubted he'd ever be a *Father Finian*. Even *Father Bracken* still sounded strange to him. He noticed his priestly black suit and collar were newer, crisper, than Father Callaghan's rumpled attire.

"Rock Point isn't one of those charming Maine villages you see in the tourist ads," the American priest said, halfway through his pint of Guinness, clearly not his first of the blustery March evening. "What do they call them in England? Chocolate-box villages? If you want that, you go to Heron's Cove a few miles away. Rock Point's a real fishing village."

"When do you return?" Finian asked.

"Monday." Father Callaghan counted on his stubby fingers. "Just three more days on the old sod."

Next to Finian, Sean took a big gulp of his Guinness and didn't say a word. Sean could be a conversationalist, but not so far tonight. Finian smiled at his fellow priest. "Is this your first trip to Ireland?"

"Yes, it is. I'd been wanting to go for ages. I buried a man last fall who for years said he wanted to see Ireland, but he never did. He died suddenly, still thinking he'd get here. He was seventy-six. I just turned sixty-two. Jack Maroney was his name, God rest his soul." Father Callaghan picked up his pint glass. "I booked my flight the day after his funeral."

"Good for you," Sean said, raising his pint. "To the old sod."

Finian, unsure if Sean was sincere or trying to be ironic, raised his whiskey glass. "To Ireland."

"To Ireland." Father Callaghan polished off the last of his Guinness. "I was feeling sorry for old Jack Maroney, and for myself, truth be told. Then I thought—do I want to die with no dreams left to pursue? Or do I want to die with a dream or two still in my pocket?"

Sean jumped in before Finian could come up with an answer. "Depends on the dream. Some dreams you know are unattainable."

"I'm not talking about playing center for the Boston Celtics."

Sean pointed his glass at the priest. "Yes, you're right, Father Joseph, that's different. Romantic love. Now, there's an unattainable dream. For me, anyway. I'm not a priest." He winced and took a sharp breath as he looked at Finian. "Ah, blast it, Fin, I wasn't thinking. Forgive me."

"No worries," Finian said quietly, then turned again to Father Callaghan. "Will you come back to Ireland one day? Perhaps when it's warmer?"

"I'd love to spend a year here. Maybe take a sabbatical." The American priest sat up straight on his barstool as if to emphasize this idea wasn't a whim but something he was determined to do. "As soon as I can swing it, I'll be back, even if it's just for a couple weeks. I want to see more ruins and stone circles and such, and walk the ground of the Irish saints. I was in Ardmore today. We're in the heart of Saint Declan country."

Finian had visited Ardmore's monastic ruins and twelfth-century round tower, and also a particularly good hotel with an excellent whiskey selection. "Ardmore is quite beautiful."

"Sea cliffs, a sand beach, fascinating ruins. It's a wonderful place even if you don't give a fig about an early-medieval Irish saint."

"But you chose to stay here in Declan's Cross," Sean said.

"Another intriguing place." Father Callaghan glanced around the bar lounge, its half-dozen tables and upholstered chairs and sofas empty as yet on the quiet evening. "I wanted to indulge myself and spend a couple nights here. I'm in the smallest guest room, but the O'Byrne is still the most luxurious accommodation on my itinerary. It's been perfect. It only opened as a hotel last fall. It used to be a private home. Quite a history. I assume you know it?"

Sean buried his face in his Guinness, leaving Finian to answer. "We do, of course, sure. It was the country home of the current owner's uncle, John O'Byrne, who died a few years ago."

"A thief broke in here ten years ago, before it was a hotel, obviously, and made off with a fortune in art," Father Callaghan said. "The case has never been solved. A tiny, picturesque Irish village, a crumbling Irish mansion on the sea, an old widower with a taste for art—it'd make a great Hollywood movie."

He eyed Finian and Sean as if to see how they'd react. Sean set down his pint and made no comment. He was a strong, fit man, dark-haired and blue-eyed, dedicated to his work as a member of an elite detective unit in Dublin but still a child of Declan's Cross. Finian was more angular, his dark hair straighter, his eyes a darker blue, his roots in southwest Ireland—he wasn't as intimate with the details of the theft at the O'Byrne house as Sean would be.

With an almost imperceptible shrug, Father Callaghan continued. “The thief made off with three Irish landscape paintings and an old Celtic cross. Sneaked in through that door there.” He pointed to French doors that led out to the terrace and gardens. “I gather it happened on one of your dark and stormy Irish nights.”

Finian smiled, liking the American. Sean remained quiet, whether because he was from Declan’s Cross or because he was a detective, Finian didn’t know. He said, “November, in fact.”

Finian’s answer seemed to satisfy Father Callaghan. The American priest’s two nights at the O’Byrne House Hotel, he further explained, were an indulgence he’d saved for the end of his trip. The hotel had opened to rave reviews, its restaurant, spa, rooms, gardens and service all meeting the test of even the most exacting and discerning guests. Finian had to admit he still had an affinity for fine hotels. He couldn’t call it a weakness when he thought about the many good people he knew who worked so hard and invested so much to provide their guests with a pleasant respite.

Kitty O’Byrne Doyle, John O’Byrne’s niece and the proprietor of the O’Byrne House Hotel, had made herself scarce when Finian had arrived with Sean. No surprise there, although Finian had more suspicions than facts about the history between handsome Garda Detective Murphy and blue-eyed, black-haired, no-nonsense Kitty.

“How do you like being a priest so far?” Father Callaghan asked.

Finian welcomed the change in subject. “Is it something I’m to like or dislike?”

“Ah. You really are new. If you can remember this one thing in parish work, it’ll save you a lot of trouble.” The American eyed his empty glass on the polished wood bar. “Sometimes you’re the first one to know something. Sometimes you’re the last one to know. Sometimes you’re the only one to know. Do your best to recognize which it is, and then forgive yourself when you get it wrong—because even if most times you get it right, there will be times when you will get it wrong.”

It seemed like sound advice to Finian.

Kitty swept into the lounge and went behind the bar. She wore a simple black dress that made her look at once professional and elegant. She was always, Finian thought, lovely. She smiled at him and ignored Sean. “How are you, Fin? Will you be staying with us tonight?”

“I’m doing well, Kitty. It’s good to see you. I’m staying up at the Murphy farm.”

She still didn’t look at Sean. “The spring lambs are starting to arrive, I’m sure.”

“We lost one this morning,” Sean said, casual. “A coyote got it. Bit its little head—”

Kitty stopped him midsentence with a stony glare, then turned back to Finian. “I love to see the lambs prancing in the fields in the spring.” She looked at Father Callaghan. “Anything else I can get you, Father?”

“Not right now. I might have a look at your whiskey cabinet a little later.”

“I recommend the Bracken 15 year old,” Kitty said with a quick smile at Finian.

“Sean and I will be on our way,” Finian said.

“All right, then. Good night, Fin. Sean.” She spun into a small backroom behind the bar.

Father Callaghan raised his eyebrows at Sean. “There’s a story between you two, isn’t there?”

“It’d take the full bottle of Bracken 15 to tell that tale,” Sean said.

“I’ve no doubt.” The older priest’s eyes—a pale green—shifted to Finian. “Bracken 15? Father Bracken? A connection?”

“My brother and I started Bracken Distillers in our early twenties,” Finian said.

Father Callaghan’s surprise was obvious. “Then you decided to become a priest?”

Sean spared Finian from having to answer. “Another long story,” he said, easing off his barstool. “Good to meet you, Father Joseph. Enjoy your last few days in Ireland. I hope you get that sabbatical.”

“Thanks. I enjoyed meeting you both, too. Finian, if you’d like to spend a year in southern Maine, maybe we can work something out with your bishop. You know where to find me.”

Finian stood, smiling at the American. “Saint Patrick’s Church in Rock Point, Maine.”

* * * * *

“You’re going to see about taking this parish in Maine?” Sean asked as he and Finian turned onto the quiet lane that wound onto Shepherd Head, the village lights twinkling beneath them in the darkness. It was a good walk—much of it uphill—to Murphy farm, but also a decent night for it, windy and chilly but dry.

Finian continued a few steps before he answered. “I’d be doing the old fellow a favor.”

“And yourself.”

“Maybe, maybe not. It would only be a year, while Joseph Callaghan got his fill of Guinness, Irish saints and Irish genealogy.”

“You don’t think he’ll get his fill of Irish scenery?”

Finian could hear the Celtic Sea crashing onto the cliffs, and he could see stars and a half-moon in the sky above the black horizon. “One can never get one’s fill of Irish scenery.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re thinking about being away from it for a year.”

“You’re a cynical man, Sean Murphy.”

“You know what ecclesiastic strings to pull to get this parish?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

The village lights disappeared, and the hill became more steep, the cliffs closer—a sharp plummet across a narrow strip of grass and a low stone wall. Sean had grown up here on Shepherd Head. Finian had grown up on a farm in the Kerry hills, if not one as prosperous as the Murphy farm. He and his twin brother Declan were eldest of five. Declan was married with three small children. Two of their three younger sisters were married, also with small children.

Finian braked his thinking and returned himself to this moment, this quiet walk along the edge of sea cliffs. He could hear sheep now in the dark, distant fields. When he’d arrived late that afternoon, Sean and his uncle, who worked the farm, had just brought several vulnerable pregnant ewes down to the barn and an adjoining field.

“I suppose I should have been nicer to Kitty,” Sean said.

“I wouldn’t have mentioned the coyote killing the newborn lamb, I have to say.”

“As if she’s never heard of such a thing. She’s been coming to Declan’s Cross since she was a baby, and she’s lived here for two years, fixing up that blasted house of hers.”

“You wish it’d been torn down.”

“Leveled,” Sean concurred with a hand motion to go with the image.

Finian didn’t know if his friend meant what he said. “Is that why you asked me here? You want to talk to me about Kitty—”

“Kitty? Why would I want to talk to you about her?”

“The art theft, then?” Finian asked.

“I didn’t ask you here about Kitty O’Byrne or an old art theft.”

Finian would have been surprised if he had. In their friendship of almost seven years, anytime Finian had brought them up, Sean had changed the subject. Sean came down to Declan’s Cross as often as he could, given his demanding work in Dublin. He’d always wanted to be in the guards. *An Garda Síochána*, in Irish. The Guardians of the Peace. He’d never discussed with Finian the sacrifices his position required. He preferred, he’d said many times, to leave the job in Dublin when he was home in Declan’s Cross.

Finian had sold his house in the southwest of Ireland years ago, but he still owned a traditional stone cottage in the Kerry hills. The home of his heart. His wife, Sally, had seen its possibilities, and they’d set to restoring it, doing much of the work themselves. He couldn’t bring himself to stay there but loaned it to friends. He’d cleaned out all the personal items and put in a new bed, but it was still decorated with Sally’s taste.

He hadn’t slept there since the first anniversary of the tragedy that had taken her life, and the lives of their two small daughters. He’d been in and out of a drunken haze for months. Friends, family and even perfect strangers had tried to help, but he hadn’t wanted help. He’d wanted oblivion.

He’d drunk bad whiskey that night. Why waste good whiskey on a man such as himself?

He’d been half asleep on the cottage floor when Sean Murphy had burst in, dragged his friend’s drunken carcass to the bay and shoved him into the ice-cold water, swearing next time he’d let him drown.

Freezing, furious, Finian had crawled out of the cold water, staggered to his feet and taken a swing at Garda Detective Murphy. Sean easily could have sidestepped the blow but he took it square in the chest. Finian had been too weak—too pathetic—to hurt him.

He’d vomited on the pebbled beach until he collapsed onto his knees with dry heaves and then sprawled face down on the hard, cold ground.

He’d wanted to die. For the past year, he’d wanted nothing else.

Sean had fetched a blanket and a bottle of water and set them next to Finian on the beach.

“*Live or die, Fin. It’s your choice.*”

Then he’d left.

Finian remembered mist, rain, wind, wails—a banshee, he’d thought at first, then realized it was himself. Keening, cursing, sobbing. He’d flung stones, clawed the cold, wet sand and attempted to dig his own grave with his hands, and he’d cried.

Dear God, he'd cried.
Sally, Kathleen, Mary.
My sweet girls.

Gone, gone, gone.

Sober, desperately sad, Finian had collapsed again, hoping to die in his sleep of hypothermia, or something—anything. Instead he'd awakened to sunlight streaming through high, thin clouds and the soothing sounds of the tide washing onto the pebbled beach.

He'd sat up and drunk Sean's water, and then he'd walked back up to the cottage.

He didn't stay. He'd loaded up a pack, emailed his brother not to worry and walked out of the cottage, past Sally's empty colorful flowerpots, hearing her laughter, and kept walking.

For days, he'd walked.

When his mind would wander off, he'd bring it back to where he was—he would notice the warmth of the sun, the crunch of stones, the cry of birds, the taste of cheese, apple and brown bread, the green of distant hills and the deep pink of foxgloves on old stone walls. He'd passed waterfalls and cliffs, cold lakes and misty bays, sheep wandering down grassy lanes, lively villages, lonely cottages and tourists *oohing* and *aahing* at the gorgeous Kerry scenery. He'd stopped in pretty places for a bite to eat, sitting in the sunlit grass, or on a hilltop, or amid wildflowers, taking in his surroundings.

When he heard the voice of God calling him to another life, he had no doubts. It wasn't the work of depression, grief, alcohol withdrawal, loneliness or insect bites. He couldn't explain and eventually realized he didn't have to. He just had to decide what to do.

It hadn't been an easy road. It still wasn't.

Finian slowed his pace as he and Sean came to the top of the hill. With the lights of the village no help to them now, Finian produced the key-size flashlight he had with him, a lesson learned from previous walks up to the Murphy farm with his friend. Sean would never have a flashlight. He didn't need one on this land.

"I have a favor to ask, Fin," Sean said, still clearly preoccupied.

"Of course."

"Don't be too quick. There's only so much I can tell you, even as a priest."

"It's about an investigation, then."

Sean gave a curt nod.

"I'll do anything I can," Finian said. "You know I will."

Sean walked a few steps ahead, then stopped, a dark silhouette against the shadows of the night as he turned to Finian. "This you won't want to do."

Finian heard a sheep close by, near a fence. "Let me be the one to decide. What do you need?"

"A name," Sean said. "I need a name."

Chapter 2

An ewe cried out in distress just before dawn. Finian went out to the barn with Sean and helped deliver a healthy lamb. With mother and baby safe and warm, Finian followed his friend back to the farmhouse, grinning as he hung his coat on a hook. "I hope I didn't misunderstand and this is the work God called me to do."

Sean laughed. "Farm work, Fin? Delivering lambs at dawn? I don't think so."

The kitchen was cool, a dampness in the air, but Sean got a turf fire going in the old fireplace and it was soon warm enough. Finian sat at the pine table. He'd jumped into jeans and a wool shirt. No clerical suit for working in the barn.

Sean put the kettle on to boil. "A full Irish breakfast this morning, Fin?"

"Perfect."

Sean set to work, and Finian's mind drifted, as it sometimes still did. He could see his fair-haired, beautiful wife, and he could hear her laughter when, years ago, facing the uncertainties of business, he'd wondered aloud if he should be a farmer.

"You a farmer? Oh, Fin. That's just so funny."

"We were farmers as boys. Declan and I."

"And now you're whiskey men."

He and Sally had been enjoying a pint and traditional Irish music at a Kenmare pub. She was such fun—and so smart. A young marketing consultant who'd just finished a project for Bracken Distillers.

He'd fallen for her on the spot and asked her to marry him three months later. They'd been hiking in Killarney National Park. She'd said yes without hesitation and burst into tears and laughter as she'd hugged him so hard they both fell to the ground.

He'd been twenty-four. She'd been twenty-three.

Kathleen had been born the next year. Mary three years later.

My sweet girls.

Finian returned himself to the present. He smelled the turf fire, and he noticed the chipped paint on the old-fashioned dresser, the plates lined up on its open shelves, the crooked lower doors worn with age and use. He watched Sean drop tea bags into a brown pot and then fill the pot with the hot water. His garda friend looked at ease, totally natural, in his torn flannel shirt and muddy work pants. Maybe at heart he was a farmer after all, meant for a life out here on Shepherd Head instead of the occasional few days off to help his uncle.

Sean Murphy had been a young, ambitious garda when he'd located Finian in his office at the old distillery he and Declan had returned to life, just outside Killarney. An important business matter had come up and Sally and the girls had started their sailing holiday without him. He would join them at their first stop that evening. He hadn't been enthusiastic about sailing, but Sally had thought it would be a grand adventure for them and the girls.

It was Garda Murphy who'd told Finian his wife and daughters were dead.

And who'd suspected him of having killed them.

* * * * *

It wasn't as full an Irish breakfast as Sean had promised because, it turned out, the tomatoes had spoiled. Finian didn't mind, but Sean shook his head and sighed. "I miss my grilled tomatoes."

He was only half joking. Finian poured more tea. "Next time."

"I think the rotten ones are from the last time I was down. Paddy doesn't stay up here as much. He's thinking about converting this place into a bed-and-breakfast or a holiday home. Can you imagine?"

"You could book it to people wanting an authentic Irish experience," Finian said with a smile.

Paddy Murphy, Sean's uncle, had been born in the simple farmhouse and had lived there until just a few months ago, when he'd moved into an apartment in the village. He was in his seventies, a longtime widower with no children. Sean's father was gone now, too. Sean wasn't a big talker, but Finian had pieced together the Murphy family story over a pint or a glass of whiskey. Finian's heavy-drinking days were in the past, and Sean had never been one for over imbibing. He was a driven man but one of great control.

Yet Finian could see that something was eating at his friend. It had to be this investigation. This favor. This name he wanted. He'd gone up to bed last night without telling Finian more. Finian had slept in a small bedroom off the kitchen, the barn just out back. Nonetheless, Sean had heard the distressed ewe first—a farmer's instincts or, more likely, an intercom system between the barn and his bedroom.

"You didn't invite me here to help with the sheep," Finian said finally.

"That would be the day, wouldn't it? You might have grown up on a farm, but that didn't make you a farmer."

"Nor did it make you one, Sean." Finian picked at the last of his grilled mushrooms. He'd had more of an appetite than he'd expected. Helping birth a lamb must have contributed. "You asked me here because of this name you want. Tell me more. If I can help, I will."

Sean settled back in his chair. "I'm looking for a man who's been in touch with you. Not as a priest. As a Bracken."

"I'm always a priest, Sean."

"I know that. I mean this man worked for Bracken Distillers."

"Ah. I see. He doesn't work for us any longer?"

"I don't think so. He contacted me a few days ago but wouldn't give me his name. He'd said he'd call again, but he didn't."

"Why don't you ask Declan about him?"

Sean scratched the side of his mouth. "It's not that simple." He leaned forward over the table. "This man called me because he knew you and I were friends. He sought you out because you're a Bracken and for no other reason. What did he tell you?"

"I haven't said I know the man you're talking about."

"But you do."

He did, indeed. Becan Kennedy was an itinerant carpenter who had done small jobs at the distillery over the winter and then moved on. Last week, Finian had stopped at the distillery, in his priest's garb. Becan had stopped by to do a few small touchups on a project he'd finished in February. He'd pulled him aside and asked to talk to him, in confidence.

They'd walked down to a field and old shed out behind the main distillery buildings. Becan had explained he was mixed up with "a bad lot" and deeply

troubled by “some things” he knew. He didn’t want to go to prison. He didn’t want to anger his unsavory friends. He didn’t want to get in deeper with them. Finian had encouraged him to get in touch with the proper authorities without delay.

Becan had said, “*I hear you know a detective in Dublin. Sean Murphy. Do you trust him?*”

“*With my life, Becan. And so can you.*”

Finian hadn’t seen Becan Kennedy since and didn’t know where to find him—and he couldn’t give Sean his name.

“You want to find this man,” Finian said, “but you don’t know who he is. Would it help if I encouraged him to contact you again?”

Sean got up from the table, shaking his head as if just realizing the implications of what his friend was saying. “No, Fin. Don’t go to him yourself.”

“If he comes to me?”

“Would he?”

Finian shrugged without answering. It was possible if not probable.

Sean rummaged on the dresser, produced an index card and a black marker and jotted down a string of numbers. He handed the card to Finian. “If he comes to you, give him this number. No one but me has it. Tell him to call me. Tell him nothing else.”

“You know more than you’re saying, aren’t you?”

He pointed to the card. “*Only* if he comes to you, Fin. I mean it.”

Finian looked out a window, across a sloping lawn and fields turning green to the sea. The sun was up now, burning off the morning mist. His throat tightened. He was certain of his call to the priesthood and the vows he had professed at his ordination. But Ireland... being a priest here...

He couldn’t deny the truth. Everywhere were reminders of his loss. Of the man he’d been and was no more. Husband, lover, father, businessman.

“You’ll be leaving Declan’s Cross this morning?” Sean asked.

Finian nodded, turning from the window. “You?”

“Back to Dublin for me.”

A dozen questions about why Sean Murphy was looking for Becan Kennedy rose up in Finian’s mind, but he didn’t ask even one of them as he saw his friend off to the barn and then headed out to his car.

Father Callaghan would still be at the O’Byrne House Hotel, enjoying his last days in Ireland. Given his melancholy mood, Finian wouldn’t disturb the older priest, but he knew what he would do after he left Declan’s Cross.

This tiny village, the O’Byrne House Hotel, Father Callaghan, Sean, the sheep... Becan Kennedy. All of it, somehow, was providential. Finian felt that truth deep inside him.

As soon as he could, he would get in touch with his bishop and talk to him about spending a year in Rock Point, Maine.

Chapter 3

Spring blossomed across Ireland, and it was done—Finian would leave in June to serve Saint Patrick’s Church in Rock Point, Maine.

Joseph Callaghan would get his year in Ireland.

The next weeks flew by, and finally June was upon him. Finian spent his last few days in Ireland with his brother and his family at their home in the hills outside Killarney. He’d emailed Sean Murphy about Maine, receiving back only a terse “And you think Irish winters are bad.”

Finian hadn’t seen Sean since their visit in Declan’s Cross in March, but he’d kept watch for stories on special criminal investigations. He hadn’t noticed any that suggested Sean Murphy’s or Becan Kennedy’s involvement. Finian had been tempted to contact Becan, but he’d heeded Sean’s advice—Garda advice—and focused instead on his preparations for his temporary move to Rock Point.

Until the morning before his departure to America when he received a cryptic text message that could only be from Becan Kennedy.

Becan wanted to meet.

* * * * *

Early the next morning, on his final day in Ireland before his year in Maine, Finian dragged Declan out to Old Kenmare Road, a trail that ran through mixed terrain between Torc Waterfall and the attractive market village of Kenmare. Declan’s wife, Fidelma, and their children—two boys and a girl under the age of ten—dropped them off at the abandoned church near Ladies View, where Queen Victoria’s ladies-in-waiting had admired the stunning views of the lakes of Killarney in 1861.

Finian paused and looked across the sunlit hills, tufts of white clouds floating high above Kenmare Bay in the distance. How could he last a year without seeing this place?

Yet he had to leave. Nothing was the same since the deaths of Sally and the girls, and yet everything was the same, but he knew that was only part of it. He was meant to be in Rock Point. He could feel that truth more than he could explain it.

“Ah, Fin, what a day,” Declan said next to him. “We’ll miss you, but you’ll be back.”

“I will.”

His brother—so like him, so different from him—drank from his water bottle. Declan, too, looked out at the hills and the sweep of the barren hills and glens. “I don’t feel abandoned,” he said as he returned his water bottle to his pack. “You might be a priest now, but you’ve always been and always will be my brother.”

“And you mine, Declan.”

“No matter what madness we face in this life.”

The bond between them had always been strong—as fraternal twins, as two brothers with three younger sisters, then as business partners.

Tilters at whiskey windmills, they’d called themselves in the early days.

They continued down the hill. The trail was narrower, rockier, even quieter. Finian felt the sun warm on the back of his neck. He’d dressed in hiking clothes. No need for the clerical suit out here. It told others who he was, but it didn’t make the priest.

He imagined Sally's smile and amusement at the thought of him as a priest.

"Father Bracken... Oh, Fin, that's just delicious."

Seven years this summer since her death, and he thought of her and their daughters every day. How could he not?

Embracing grief, recovering from it, didn't mean forgetting.

Less and less did he let himself slide down into the dark hole of wishing the past could be different than it was. He had his regrets. They were a part of him now. If only he'd been with Sally and the girls that day. He didn't know enough about sailing to think he could have saved them, but at least he could have died with them.

At least they wouldn't have died without him.

A rogue wave it was, capsizing their small yacht.

Sean Murphy had explained several days after the tragedy. *"They went overboard, all three at once. They didn't stand a chance. They drowned, probably soon after. There were no other boats in the vicinity. The water was very cold. Hypothermia would have set in quickly even if they hadn't drowned."*

Drowned. Finian remembered trying to understand what that meant. He couldn't make sense of it. He'd been in his office at Bracken Distillers. He'd slept there, unable to go home. Divers had rescued the captain of the chartered yacht, but it was touch-and-go whether he would survive. Divers had also recovered the bodies of Finian's wife and daughters.

Gardai—led by Sean—were conducting a thorough investigation.

Sean knew he was under suspicion. Did he sabotage the small yacht? Hire someone who did?

"The captain is recovering from a head injury and hypothermia," Sean had continued. *"He regained consciousness and explained what happened. He tried to save your wife and daughters. They wore life vests, but they didn't help in this situation, at least not enough."*

"Then it was an accident? There's no question of anything else?"

Sean—Garda Murphy—had paused, leveled his gaze on Finian. *"We have no reason to suspect it was anything else."*

"Where are they now? Sally... Kathleen, Mary?"

"Their remains will be released to you. I'm very sorry for your loss, Mr. Bracken."

The investigation continued, and the sinking of the yacht was deemed an accident. A terrible, unforgiving accident that had resulted in three deaths. The captain left Ireland for Australia soon after, but he'd died of natural causes a year ago. He'd blamed himself for the tragedy, although no one else did. He and Finian had never met, never talked. After all, what was there to say?

Finian realized he had sped up his pace to a near-manic level. He stopped, letting his brother catch up with him. A soft breeze floated down from the hills, and Finian told himself he would remember its smell when he was in Maine. Remember its coolness on his face and its murmur among the rocks, fields, streams and knots of trees and shrubs.

"We've had our share of madness in our almost forty years on this planet," Finian said, referring to Declan's earlier comment. He and his brother were like this—able to pick up conversations minutes, days, months after they'd started. "You've never said as much but you think it's madness that I'm a priest."

“Not madness, exactly.” They walked a little ways, not another soul in sight, before Declan continued. “I worry you’re running from your past.”

“In becoming a priest or taking this church in Maine?”

“Both. I don’t question that God called you to a different life. I question your interpretation of this call.”

“I told Sean Murphy that maybe God meant for me to be a sheep farmer.”

Declan managed a small smile. “That would be a sight. I see you in this Maine fishing village before I see you back on a farm. It never suited you.”

“I helped Sean birth a lamb.”

“Dear God.”

They continued in comfortable silence. Declan, Finian knew, hadn’t expected a response to his worries. He would speak his mind and let Finian decide what to do. It had always been that way between them. They’d worked side by side in the competitive world of international whiskey, brainstorming, arguing, laughing at setbacks and successes alike. They’d been tireless. Pragmatic when they had to be. Dreamers always.

Kenmare Bay was closer now, as blue as the sky.

“What a day, Declan,” Finian said.

His brother smiled. “Yes. What a day.”

Houses appeared on the lane, and soon Fidelma and the children greeted them in the village. The little ones hugged their father. They wanted ice cream.

“You’ll join us, won’t you, Fin?” pretty, red-haired Fidelma asked him.

“Of course.”

They walked to a small ice-cream shop and bought cones made with local cream. Chocolate chip for Finian. They all headed down to Reenagross Park together, laughing, chatting, as if Finian weren’t off to America tomorrow.

A hired car would meet him outside the park. He didn’t want their goodbyes to be at the airport but here, in Kenmare, having ice cream together. “We’ll come see you in Maine,” Fidelma whispered, tears in her eyes, as she and Finian embraced. “Fin, my God... I’ve been thinking about Sally and the girls all day. I miss them so much. I always will.” She stood back, tears streaming down her cheeks now. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s all right, Fidelma. I miss them, too.”

“It’s part of the reason you’re leaving us now, though, isn’t it? You’re not just escaping memories. You’re escaping all of us, too. Our lives. Watching our three grow up while yours...”

“While Kathleen and Mary stay forever little girls,” Finian said, finishing for her.

She went pale and whispered, “Pay no attention to me, Fin.”

He hugged her close. “God be with you, Fidelma. I’m not escaping from my life here, and I’ll come home. I promise.”

Declan opened the door of the waiting car for his twin brother. “Feck,” he said, as only an Irishman could. “I hate goodbyes. We’ll see you soon, Fin. Godspeed.”

As he climbed into the car, Finian held back tears of his own. On their twenty-second birthday, he and Declan had taken a long hike in the Kerry hills and ended up deciding to go into the whiskey business. They’d built Bracken Distillers and made it a success against the odds—against the wise advice of most commonsense people they knew.

Now Finian had a different calling.

Declan would continue with the whiskey business they both loved, and Finian would spend the next year serving the people of little Rock Point, Maine.

Chapter 4

Finian had the car stop at Bracken Distillers, located in a restored seventeenth-century distillery just outside Killarney. He asked the driver to wait for him. Instead of going into the main building, Finian walked around to the back, then down a hill to a roofless stone shed he and Declan often talked about turning into a health club for employees. This was where, in March, Finian had walked with Becan Kennedy. Finian had assumed Becan, a carpenter who'd worked on many old buildings, had wanted to give his opinion on the shed's potential as a health club, but that notion had soon been dismissed.

Becan had requested Finian meet him in the same spot.

The partial walls and foundation of the old shed were covered in vines and moss, shaded by an oak tree. Becan eased out from behind the remains of the stone chimney. He was a thin, nervous man, no more than forty himself, in terrible shape despite his work as a carpenter. He had sagging, pallid skin and watery blue eyes that didn't connote midnight romances or quiet seas but, rather, a tormented soul. He wore nondescript jeans and a colorless T-shirt, and his trail shoes were crusty with dried mud. Finian hadn't changed back into his clerical suit—he would in the morning, before his flight—but Becan recognized him from his work at the distillery, before Sean Murphy had invited Finian to Declan's Cross.

Without Becan Kennedy, Finian thought, he wouldn't have been at the O'Byrne House Hotel in March and met Father Callaghan, and he wouldn't be on his way to Maine.

"I was named for a saint," Becan said, tossing a cigarette into the mud.

Finian nodded. "So was I. There are a number of Irish saints named Finian, but the one I'm named for served here in the southwest. Do you know about Saint Becan?"

"He was a better man than I, no doubt."

"He founded a monastery in Kilbeggan."

Becan shifted from one foot to another; he was restless, distracted. "I only know Kilbeggan whiskey," he said with a snort.

"Saint Becan lived in the sixth century—at least a century after Saint Patrick." Finian kept his voice steady, hoping to ease the younger man's nervousness. "He was a religious hermit."

"Some days I'd like to be a hermit," Becan said. "Just skip the religious part."

"Why did you ask me here, Becan?"

He gave a crooked grin. "Not to discuss a lap pool in back of the health club. You know the guards are after me, don't you?"

The guards. Gardai. The Irish police. A certain detective Finian knew would want to be here now, and wouldn't be happy that his friend had come to meet Becan Kennedy alone.

Finian made no response. He felt his hike with his brother in the backs of his legs. He was in good shape but nonetheless hoped the exercise would help him sleep on the flight tomorrow.

"I talked to your detective friend in March," Becan said. "He tried to get you to give him my name, didn't he? But you didn't. You're a priest. You can't."

"What I'm wondering, Becan, is why *you* don't tell the guards who you are. They can help you."

Becan withdrew a pack of cigarettes from a back pocket. "You were decent to me." He tapped out a cigarette and pointed it at Finian. "You understand that men make mistakes."

"Spiritually or—"

"All kinds." He was nervous, fidgety, his eyes not meeting Finian's as he spoke. "I'm afraid, Father."

"Not of the guards," Finian said.

"Maybe. I don't know. I told your garda friend some things, about what I'm into. Then I got scared. I don't know what to do, Father. I don't trust anyone—except you."

"Did you come here alone?"

"Yeah, sure. Who'd come with me, you know? To see a priest?"

Finian had no answer for that question. "You didn't invite anyone else to join us?"

"God, no. Not the lot I'm with."

"And no one followed you?"

Becan stuck his cigarette on his lip and dug out a lighter. "No one followed me," he said under his breath, lighting his cigarette. "I didn't need that thought running in my head, you know, Father?"

"It was already there, though, wasn't it, Becan?"

He took a deep drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke off to the side, away from Finian. "I suppose you're right. I'm glad you're here, Father. Thanks for coming. I didn't want to involve you..." He waved his burning cigarette. "But here we are."

"What can I do for you, Becan?"

"I wish I'd stuck to carpentry work." He glanced at the shed with an air of regret mixed with resignation. "But I didn't, did I? I got into things I wish I hadn't. I was almost hoping the guards followed you here."

"I understand," Finian said.

Becan threw down his partially smoked cigarette and ground it out with his heel. "You don't know we used this back field for one of our operations, do you?"

"What 'operation,' Becan?"

"Smuggling."

"Whiskey smuggling?"

"Whiskey, cigarettes, pills, counterfeit money. Not hard drugs or guns. Your brother doesn't know. No one here does. We didn't come onto distillery grounds, because of the security. We used the field." He nodded down past the shed to a

quiet field outside of the grounds but owned by Bracken Distillers. "It's a good spot. You'd be surprised."

"I am surprised," Finian said.

"We distributed goods out across Ireland from here," Becan said. "I think the guards are onto us. I want out, Father. I want to tell the truth. That's all."

Finian reached into the pocket of his hiking pants and withdrew the card that Sean had given him in March. "It's Sean Murphy's number. He said to give it to you in case you contacted me. No one else has it. Only he will answer."

Becan seemed ready to bolt but snatched the card and tucked it into a pocket in his jeans. He sniffled. "The guards are watching us. We're watching them. It's a dangerous situation."

"You can make the call now, Becan. I'll wait."

"I need to think. I just don't know..." He shifted abruptly. "I have to go. You won't tell anyone about me. The guards. Anyone. Right, Father?"

"That's right. There's a time and place for each of us to speak and for each of us to keep silent. You need to speak, my friend. Call the number I gave you."

Becan said nothing as he shuffled back to the old shed and disappeared.

Finian returned to his waiting car. He'd done what he could. His next stop was his hotel ahead of his flight out of Shannon Airport tomorrow.

He looked out the window as the refurbished distillery—his and Declan's dream come true—faded from sight. He remembered a warm June day like this one when Sally had greeted him at the gate after a walk out past the fields, sweaty, smiling as she'd leaned into him. "*Let's go home early, Fin. I can't wait another minute to get your clothes off you.*"

He could see her in the milky light of the endless June dusk as they'd made love.

He hadn't been a different man then. He'd been the same man he was now. To pretend otherwise—to try to make it not so—was to deny this life he'd been given, and the truth of who he was.

Suddenly he couldn't wait to be in Maine.

* * * * *

His hotel had dreadful food but a surprisingly decent selection of whiskey. No Bracken Distillers expressions, but Finian ordered an excellent Kilbeggan to take some of the edge off his soggy fish-and-chips. He'd ordered them before he remembered Rock Point was a fishing village and would presumably have restaurants that served proper fish-and-chips when the occasional urge struck.

He followed his bad fish-and-chips with a delicious bread-and-butter pudding. He doubted he'd eat much, if anything, on the plane tomorrow. He could excuse, or at least rationalize, the rich meal and hoped it would help him sleep tonight.

He was savoring the last bite of his pudding when Sean Murphy slid into the booth across from him. Sean had a devil-may-care look about him at the same time as the air of a professional law enforcement officer—an uneasy combination that no doubt he used to great advantage.

Sean leaned back against the cushioned booth. "Your friend called."

"I have many friends, Sean," Finian said.

"Did you ask to meet him or did he ask to meet you?"

“Does it matter now?”

Sean’s eyes narrowed. “Either way, Fin, you’re playing with fire.”

“I’m not playing with anything. I’m flying to Boston tomorrow.” He abandoned his pudding and drank some of his whiskey. “Do you and your garda associates have Bracken Distillers under surveillance?”

“For what?”

“That implies you do, and there could be multiple reasons.”

“It doesn’t imply anything. Practically speaking, we’d have to have good reason to put anyone under surveillance. Do we, Fin? Do we have good reason to investigate Bracken Distillers?”

“You’re a suspicious man, Garda Detective Murphy. You’d suspect your own sheep of wrongdoing if you discovered one of your fields was being used behind your back for untoward purposes.”

Sean barely smiled. “No doubt I would. Blasted sheep.”

Finian left it at that and sighed. “You’re in danger, aren’t you, Sean?”

“Comes with the territory.” Sean’s smile was genuine now. “Relax, Fin. Enjoy your flight tomorrow. Come back and see us soon, and stay in touch.”

He didn’t linger, and Finian sensed the seriousness behind his friend’s easy manner.

“Be careful, Sean.”

“No worries, my friend. No worries at all.”

* * * * *

Finian had time for a breakfast that was worse than his fish-and-chips before he had to be at the airport. It wasn’t really close enough to walk to the terminal, but he walked anyway. His luggage was no trouble at all. He’d always been a light packer, even before he’d become a priest.

“I have cousins in America, Fin. We should visit them one day.”

“We will, Sally. We will.”

“They’re in New York and Savannah. They say Savannah is beautiful in early spring.”

Finian shook off the image of his sweet wife lying in bed next to him on a warm summer night as they’d dreamed of their future together, whispering about trips to far-off places. She’d never worried when he traveled, and traveled often herself. They’d staggered their trips after the girls arrived, but had found themselves more and more reluctant to leave home, especially alone.

Finian entered the terminal. He wasn’t a whiskey man now. He was a priest, on his way to serve a small parish in America. He looked up at the board to check the number of the appropriate Aer Lingus counter at which to drop off his luggage and collect his boarding pass.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed two men standing together in the wide, open doorway of a shop, next to a table piled with books.

Finian thought they were watching him but couldn’t be sure.

He looked straight at them, but they turned away. Middle-aged, average size, dressed in casual clothes that wouldn’t draw attention. No luggage. No air of urgency about catching a flight.

Gardai?

Becan Kennedy's cronies?

Finian ignored them and wheeled his luggage to the correct line. He was out of his mind, thinking they had anything to do with Sean's investigation—and if they did, they'd have to be crazy to try anything at a highly secure airport.

Was he half hoping they'd cause a commotion so he'd have an excuse not to board his flight?

After he checked his bag and got his boarding pass, he spotted the two men behind him on the escalator up to the gates. He pretended to check messages on his phone and snapped their photo as he stepped off the escalator.

In two seconds their image was off to Sean Murphy.

As Finian stepped into the security line, he noticed that the two men had disappeared. He'd missed them entirely and had no idea where they'd gone. He stepped into the duty-free shop and had a look at the whiskey offerings, including a nice display of moderately priced Bracken Distillers expressions.

He'd just paid for a bottle of water and was on his way into the lounge when Sean Murphy texted him, typically terse:

"If you see them again, notify security at once. Safe travels."

So the men weren't gardai, anyway.

Finian texted Sean an equally terse response, just as an announcement came over the loudspeaker that his flight to Boston would soon be boarding. His heart jumped as he realized he was officially on his way to America.

Chapter 5

Rock Point, Maine, was just as Father Callaghan had described. A bit run-down and struggling but located on a beautiful stretch of the northern New England coast. Finian had a car—not a parishioner or another priest—pick him up at the airport in Boston and then drop him off on the quiet street above the harbor where St. Patrick's Church and rectory stood side-by-side, sharing a lawn that was freshly cut but appeared to be mostly weeds. Father Callaghan had explained that the rectory was a Greek Revival house "due for a facelift," and the church was a granite-faced building that had originally been an American Baptist church.

Finian appreciated the mature shade trees as he carried his luggage to the back steps of the rectory. It was a warm, sunny afternoon, late in the day—even later if he considered that Ireland was five hours ahead. He'd slept little on his flight, but he'd be foolish to try to sleep now. Best to get on Maine time as soon as possible.

He left his luggage on the back steps and walked down to the village. He observed a bank, hair salon, pharmacy, liquor store, hardware store, insurance business—if not thriving, Rock Point was holding its own. He crossed the main street to a restaurant, Hurley's, a rough-wood building set on pilings and jutting out over the horseshoe-shaped harbor. High tide would reach under its floorboards. The harbor itself was crowded with working boats and a handful of pleasure boats, all bobbing in gentle waves.

Only when he walked past Hurley's down to the waterfront did Finian realize he'd been so caught up in taking in his new home he hadn't experienced his usual gut-twisting reaction at seeing sailboats.

It was a start, anyway, but as he walked out onto a pier, he felt the rush of excitement at arriving in Rock Point fade and melancholy creep in. He stood next to a stack of rectangular wire cages that smelled of dead things. It was low tide, which brought out more dead smells.

In his mind's eye, he could see the green of Ireland.

"They're lobster traps," a man at the end of the pier said, turning, giving Finian and his priest's garb a quick scan.

The American was solidly built, with dark hair, small scars on his eye and cheek and perhaps the most penetrating gray eyes Finian had ever seen. He wore a gray sweatshirt, jeans and trail shoes. A local man? Yes and no, perhaps.

"I'm not much of a fisherman," Finian said.

"Me, either, these days. You're the new priest at Saint Patrick's?"

"I am, yes. Finian Bracken."

"Colin Donovan. I'd heard we were getting an Irishman. My folks are members. I'm not much of a churchgoer."

"Easter and Christmas?"

"Funerals and weddings. When I can. I'm not in town that often."

"But you live here?" Finian asked.

He shrugged. "I have a place a few blocks from the church, but I work in Washington."

"For the government?"

"I'm with the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

The FBI, then. The words seemed to come with difficulty, as if he wasn't used to identifying himself to strangers, at least not in his hometown. He was good-looking in a rugged way. Blunt. Physical. A man's man.

Finian wondered if Colin Donovan wasn't as removed from the church of his youth as he perhaps thought he was. But it didn't matter. Finian wasn't that kind of priest.

"Home for a few days, are you?" he asked the American.

"I am." Colin looked out at the water and bobbing boats. "It's good to get away from Washington for a few days."

Finian suspected the statement was true as far as it went and no farther. "I haven't settled in yet. Where can I get a bite?"

"There." Colin nodded to the rustic restaurant on the water. "Hurley's. It's a local favorite. The clam chowder is good, but if you want anything fancier, you'll have to go into Heron's Cove."

"Hurley's sounds perfect. What should I call you?"

"Colin's fine, Father."

"Finian, or Fin, if you'd like."

Colin seemed to relax somewhat, but he struck Finian as raw, hyperaware of his surroundings, reminding him of Sean Murphy. Finian doubted the FBI agent was as convivial as Sean by nature—not that Sean had been particularly convivial last night at the hotel restaurant, or this morning in his texted reply, or, for that matter, in March during Finian's last visit to Declan's Cross.

Finian considered getting Colin's take on Becan Kennedy and the two men at Shannon airport, but it would serve no purpose. He was in a different country now. Sean's investigation in Ireland, whatever it was, whatever dangers he faced, wasn't for an Irish priest on a yearlong stay in a small town in southern Maine to sort out.

"Something on your mind, Father?" Colin asked him.

He pulled himself out of his wandering thoughts and smiled. "Whiskey."

For the first time, Colin offered a glimmer of a smile and warmth in return. "My kind of priest," he said.

"All things in moderation, even whiskey. Perhaps especially whiskey."

"Caution duly noted. Hurley's has a lousy selection, but maybe I'll see you there later."

With that, the FBI agent abruptly headed off the pier.

An interesting man, Finian thought, wondering if the good Father Callaghan had left any notes on the Donovans of Rock Point, Maine.

* * * * *

Finian arrived back at St. Patrick's to a welcome party in the recreation room. There was pie, coffee and well-wishes. In forty-five minutes everyone was gone, the place tidied and quiet. He wandered into the sanctuary. It had a foreign feel, despite all the requisite Roman Catholic accoutrements. The late-afternoon June sun streamed through a stained-glass window, adding a golden glow on the white walls, dark-wood pews and red carpet.

Father Callaghan had removed his personal items from the office, a small room off the side entrance. He'd left his books and files. A reader of Saint Augustine, the American was.

Finian locked the church behind him and walked over to the rectory. He carried his luggage into the worn kitchen and set it next to the table. Parishioners had left milk, bread, cheese, orange juice, a basket of fruit and a pie—wild blueberry, according to a handwritten note.

Ah, what would Sally think of him now?

He unzipped the outer compartment of his suitcase, an expensive black leather leftover from his days at Bracken Distillers. He withdrew a weathered case that contained a small antique hydrometer—a clever device that measured the alcohol content in spirits—and set it on the table next to the pie.

Then, with a whispered prayer, he withdrew two navy blue velvet pouches containing rosary beads a friend in Sneem had handmade for each of his daughters for their First Communion. He and Sally hadn't been particularly religious then, but they'd wanted to raise Kathleen and Mary in the church.

"Daddy, will you read me a story when we're on the boat?"

"I will, Kathleen."

Mary had piped up. *"Will you sing me a song?"*

He'd kept the rosary beads with him, but in seven years hadn't yet been able to take them from their velvet pouches.

Kathleen's were white glass, he remembered, and Mary's were pink glass.

He took the hydrometer and the pouches into the dining room and placed them in a glass-front cabinet.

The rectory was quiet, filled with late-day shadows and the faint odor of cleaning solution. It had obviously been scrubbed shortly before his arrival.

He bolted out of the dining room and left for Hurley's again. He walked, but he would have to see about a car. Father Callaghan had suggested leasing. Finian would look into it tomorrow. He was happy to have a restaurant within walking distance of the rectory—he wasn't a good cook and seldom drank alone anymore.

Hurley's was as simple and rustic inside as it was outside. He spotted Colin Donovan alone at a table in back, in front of windows overlooking the harbor, and told the waitress he was joining a friend. A stretch, perhaps, but he made his way past tables of locals and tourists—he'd spent enough time in Killarney to spot such a mix—dining on lobster, chowder, coleslaw, fried fish and pie. Rock Point seemed to be a place for pie.

Colin had no lobster, chowder, fish or pie in front of him. He held up his glass and named the American whiskey he was drinking. Finian gave an inward shudder but obviously not inward enough, because the FBI agent smiled and said, "It's rotgut, I know. You're welcome to join me."

Finian sat at the wobbly round table. The long June day was finally giving up its light, the harbor waters glasslike in the red-gold twilight. He examined a printed, plastic-coated menu that listed the establishment's limited whiskey offerings. He chose an acceptable whiskey from Tennessee.

Colin leaned back in his chair. "A whiskey connoisseur, are you, Fin?"

"My brother and I have a distillery in Ireland."

"Bracken Distillers," the FBI agent said, then tilted forward on his chair. "The church ladies didn't tell me. Father Joseph did. We'll have to work on John Hurley and get him to improve his whiskey selection while you're in town."

Finian's whiskey arrived, complete with ice and water he hadn't requested. The waitress must have read his expression because she blushed and said, "I just assumed. I'll bring you another—"

"No worries. In this case, water and ice are appreciated."

He thought he saw Colin Donovan smile.

Finian eyed the whiskey's medium caramel color, then took a tentative sip. It really was quite decent, a smooth, full-bodied, single-barrel sour mash Tennessee whiskey. He regretted leaving in the ice and water. He raised his glass to his new American friend. "*Sláinte.*"

Colin smiled. "*Sláinte.*"

* * * * *

In the morning, Finian again found himself at Hurley's. He had today to get himself settled before he started his duties at Saint Patrick's. He thought nine was a perfectly respectable hour for breakfast but soon learned it was late by Rock Point standards. The lobstermen had long been out. Hurley's apparently renowned cider doughnuts were depleted. As he sat at his table of last night, Finian swore he could smell chowder. It was early afternoon at home in Ireland, so he was hungry and ordered eggs, toast, ham and grilled tomatoes.

His waitress was a hazel-eyed young woman with a thick dark braid hanging down her back. She frowned at him. "I'll see if we can grill a tomato, Father, but if I get tossed out of the kitchen, you'll know that didn't go over too well. We do

tomatoes in omelets, though. No problem with that. They're not grilled, though. Just cut up."

"Good to know."

"No black pudding or white pudding," she added, then smiled at him. "I can tell you're Irish. The accent. I'm of Irish descent. I'd love to go to Ireland someday. I'm thinking about doing an internship there. I'm a student—I pick up hours here when I'm in town." She took a breath. "Anyway, I'll see what I can do. White or wheat?"

"White or wheat what?"

"Toast."

Of course. Finian smiled. "Wheat."

He ordered coffee. He wasn't ready to chance Hurley's idea of tea. His waitress bustled off, and Finian looked out at the glistening harbor. The working boats were mostly out to sea. A small sailboat was moored off to his left.

Why couldn't Father Callaghan have been from Montana?

Finian tried his coffee when his waitress plunked it in front of him. It was perfect. He relaxed, and in another moment his phone vibrated on the table next to him. Declan calling to see how his first full day in America was going?

Ah, no.

He saw it was Garda Detective Murphy. "Sean," Finian said. "How are you?"

"Your friend and I arranged to meet, but he didn't show up. Do you know where he is, Fin?"

"I don't, no."

"If you did, would you tell me?"

"Depends how I knew, but it's not worth discussing since I don't know. Do you think something's happened to him?"

"If not yet, soon."

"The number I gave to him—I'm the only one who has it? That's how you know for sure it was me who gave it to him, isn't it?"

Finian could almost see Sean's smile. "You're catching on, Fin."

"I shouldn't try to sort out what's true and what's not true, should I?"

"Your friend is playing a dangerous game. Whatever he's told you, whatever I've told you, that much is true."

Becan Kennedy. The name was on Finian's lips, but he didn't say it. "Have you talked to my brother?" he asked instead.

Sean was silent for two beats. Then he said, "No, I haven't."

"I think he's checking on a painting job at the distillery. We often need this or that done. Short jobs that we hire out. We've been thinking about converting an old shed that was part of the original distillery into a health club. Imagine that. A couple of poor Kerry sheep farmers planning saunas and treadmills."

"I'll go see Declan, then." Sean added, "I've always liked him."

"Does that mean he's not a suspect?"

"A suspect in what, Fin?"

"One never knows."

"It's good you're in this Rock Point. Watch your back nonetheless."

Finian started to say goodbye when he realized that Sean had already disconnected. He set his phone back on the table.

His breakfast arrived.
No grilled tomatoes.

Chapter 6

It took most of the day to find a proper car to lease and fill out the paperwork, but Finian finally had a black BMW in his possession. He hadn't taken a vow of poverty, but he wasn't one to flaunt his wealth. Nevertheless, he'd driven a BMW in Ireland and appreciated its familiarity. The traffic even in Maine was daunting. He'd had a taste of Boston traffic when he'd arrived yesterday. A BMW seemed less of an indulgence under the circumstances.

He took it for a drive around southern Maine, checking out places like Orchard Beach, Wells, Kennebunkport and York before parking in front of a marina in Heron's Cove, an attractive classic Maine village just down the coast from Rock Point. He got out, welcomed the cool breeze blowing off the water with the rising tide. There were more pleasure boats here. He remembered a time when he'd been fascinated by yachts.

No more.

He walked up a street lined with pretty shops and large residences, most with front porches that looked out on the Atlantic. He saw porch swings, hammocks, wicker chairs, most empty despite the perfect June afternoon. Heron's Cove reminded him of reruns of *Murder, She Wrote*, but he supposed Jessica Fletcher's Cabot Cove was actually in California.

He sat on a bench on a narrow strip of grass between street and ocean, the tide crashing on rocks below him. Cormorants dove. Seagulls wheeled. Off in the distance, he heard the laughter of children.

He dug out his phone and called Declan. "I had a lobster roll for lunch and the sun is shining. How is Ireland?"

"Raining," Declan said.

Finian knew it wasn't true. He had a weather app with Killarney listed among his "favorites." He stretched out his legs, barely aware he was in a black suit while passersby were in shorts and T-shirts. "I miss Ireland. It's funny how life pieces itself together, isn't it? The threads all connecting as they should."

"Or not, as the case may be. Sean Murphy rang me."

"Ah."

"He asked if I could help him find a contract worker, probably a painter or a carpenter. I couldn't think of anyone off the top of my head. I'm checking the records, but it's a needle in a haystack. I don't even have a name for him."

"Maybe you're not the one who dealt with him."

"It's unlikely I would have. Sean is your friend. Do you know what's going on, Fin?"

"Just do as Sean says and not one thing more."

"Fin? Is this contract worker dangerous?"

"Sean Murphy's looking for him, isn't he?"

After he and Declan disconnected, Finian phoned Sean but his friend didn't pick up. Finian left a message for him to call as soon as he could.

Humidity had built up through the day, but Finian welcomed it as he took a scenic coastal road back to Rock Point. It was rougher than Heron's Cove. He parked in front of the rectory and got out into the shade of what he'd already learned was a sugar maple.

He tried to reach Sean once again but got his voice mail. He left a message. "I've missed something, Sean. Call me."

* * * * *

Finian was back at Hurley's that evening. Colin Donovan was at the back table with a bottle of Maker's Mark. "A fine Kentucky bourbon," Finian said. "It's not on the menu. You brought it?"

"Worked it out with Hurley's. I thought you might turn up tonight."

"Thank you," Finian said.

"We'll have to try Bracken 15 year old some time. We have a peated and a non-peated version."

"You've been busy."

Colin winked. "Always like to know who I'm drinking with." He had a plastic pitcher of water—no ice—and two glasses. He poured a bit of the bourbon into each glass and then handed one to Finian. "Two of my brothers are joining us. Kevin and Andy. There's a fourth brother. Mike. He's farther up the coast."

"Four Donovans."

"That's right." He grinned. "You'll get used to us."

In a short while, Kevin and Andy Donovan joined them at their table. They wore jeans and T-shirts. Kevin, the youngest brother, was a Maine state marine patrol officer. Andy, the third-born Donovan, was a lobsterman who also restored boats. All three brothers were gray-eyed and strongly built.

Colin fetched two more glasses and poured bourbon for his brothers. After just a few minutes, Finian was convinced the younger Donovans didn't believe their FBI-agent brother worked at a desk in Washington, either. Kevin and Andy left early, wishing Finian well. Andy apparently was quite the ladies' man.

Finian settled comfortably at the table and ordered a bowl of clam chowder. Colin said he wasn't hungry but didn't seem in a hurry to leave. "Is there a woman in your life?" Finian asked him.

"That would be complicated."

"Because of the nature of your work," Finian said. "You'll be leaving again soon?"

The FBI mask dropped in place. Colin ran a fingertip along the rim of his glass. "If anything happens to me, Fin, take care of my folks. My father's a retired town police officer. He'll understand. My mother won't."

"I will, of course, Colin."

He looked up then and grinned. "But nothing will happen. I'll be back in Rock Point in no time."

Finian saw it then, why this man was here—why he kept coming back. "You need Rock Point to remind you that you still have a life."

The comment seemed to catch Colin off guard. “Funny, that’s what I tell myself, too.” He raised his glass again. “You’re a wise man, Father Fin.”

Father Fin. He would have to put a stop to that before it took hold.

His chowder arrived, steaming, thick with clams and potatoes. He tasted it. It was truly excellent. A good bourbon. Good chowder. New friends. Life in Rock Point was getting better.

“How do you navigate between what you can do and what you shouldn’t do but know would help?” Finian asked.

Colin shrugged. “There’s always a way.”

His matter-of-fact response didn’t match the serious look in his eyes. He stood apart from his friends and his hometown, Finian thought, but Colin Donovan needed Rock Point.

As I do.

As he’d said to Garda Detective Murphy, he now said to Special Agent Donovan. “Be careful, my friend.”

Colin grinned at him. “Careful is for accountants, Fin. I just get the job done.”

* * * * *

Alone, back at the rectory, Finian sat with a stack of files Father Callaghan had left for him in the living room to help him understand his small parish. Finian remembered the older priest that March evening at the O’Byrne House Hotel in Declan’s Cross.

“Sometimes you’re the first one to know something. Sometimes you’re the last one to know. Sometimes you’re the only one to know.”

He’d been thinking he was the only one who knew Becan Kennedy had talked to him about his misgivings about what he was involved with.

What if he was wrong?

What if Becan’s criminal associates—these smugglers—also knew? What if they’d been watching Becan, waiting to see if he’d betrayed their trust?

Finian leaped to his feet, his heart racing. The smugglers could easily figure out he and Sean Murphy were friends, although they wouldn’t necessarily know Sean was investigating them...

“Now they do,” Finian said aloud, his jaw clenched with tension.

He could see it all. Becan meeting him at the old distillery shed. Finian giving Becan the card with Sean’s number.

Becan’s associates finding out he and Finian had met.

Then following Finian to see what he would do. Those had been the men at the airport in Shannon. Smugglers.

Becan Kennedy was in extreme danger, and so was Sean Murphy.

“They’re walking into a trap.”

Finian raked a hand through this hair and forced himself to settle down. Becan knew what sort he was dealing with. So did Sean, who was an experienced detective with a capable team behind him.

What had can-do Colin Donovan said?

“There’s always a way.”

Still on his feet, Finian phoned Sean, but again got his voice mail. He left a message: “The men who followed me in Shannon know our friend contacted you. They’re after him—and they’re after you, Sean. Be careful.”

Chapter 7

Finian was still awake at eleven when Becan Kennedy called. It was four in the morning in Ireland. Becan’s voice was ragged, hoarse. “They’re going to kill me, Father. They know I’ve talked to the guards.”

Finian switched on a side-table lamp. “Where are you now, Becan?”

“The shed behind Bracken Distillers. Where we met the other day. It’s dark. We were supposed to meet for a drop, but there’s not a soul here but me. They’re coming to kill me. I know they are.”

“Get out of there, Becan. Now. At once. There’s a Garda station—”

Becan cut him off. “I’m scared to death, Father. I’m caught in the middle. The guards will arrest me, and my friends will be mad at me.”

“Your friends won’t just be mad at you, lad. You said it yourself—they’ll kill you.” Finian got out of bed, standing on a threadbare rug in the milky light of the simple bedroom. “I can’t help you from Maine.”

“They’re here,” Becan said, his voice lowered, hushed with terror. “Father...”

Finian could hear cursing in the background, but Becan disconnected without another word.

Wide awake, Finian rang Sean, who picked up immediately. “Fin, I’m at the distillery. I know your friend is Becan Kennedy. Where is he?”

“He’s there, in the back field, by an old shed. His smuggling friends set him up. You, too. Sean, I don’t know what to believe—”

“You don’t have to know. Go back to bed, Fin. Don’t call your brother or anyone else in Ireland. I’ll be in touch.”

“Are you alone? God in heaven, Sean—”

The connection was lost, or Sean had disconnected. Finian tossed his phone aside. He put on jeans and a sweatshirt and went downstairs.

He made coffee in his strange American kitchen. He knew he wouldn’t sleep until he knew Becan’s fate. Becan was a dead man if the smugglers got to him before Sean could. Finian had no question in his mind.

And if Sean did reach Becan first? Did he have backup?

What if the criminals he was after had outwitted him?

“Not possible,” Finian said aloud, smelling the coffee as it brewed. “Just not possible.”

* * *

It was hours before he heard.

Kitty O’Byrne Doyle rang him from Declan’s Cross and gave him the news. “Sean’s alive, thank God,” she said, her voice hollow, her strain evident. “But he’s in bits, Fin. Broken ribs, punctured lung, torn shoulder, cuts, bruises. They say it was an ambush.”

“Any other deaths or injuries?”

“Not that I’ve heard. It’s still an active investigation. They’ve broken up a smuggling ring. A nasty lot. A dozen arrested already.” Her voice steadied. “The reports don’t mention Sean by name, of course, but I know he was involved—I know that’s how he was hurt.”

“Will you go to see him?”

“No. I won’t. I can’t. Fin...”

“How did you find out?”

“His uncle—Paddy told me. I doubt he has the whole story, either.”

Kitty wouldn’t say it, but Fin knew: given the nature of Sean’s work, it was unlikely any of them would ever know the whole story.

She added, “Paddy didn’t want to be the one to phone you, but he said Sean told him to make sure you knew.”

“I’ll say a prayer for him, Kitty.”

“You do that. Say one for his body to heal and another for him to get some blasted sense.”

“You think this was his doing, then?”

“One way or the other, it was. I know it, Fin, and so do you. Sean’s always thought he was invincible.” Kitty sighed. “Maybe so did the rest of us.”

Finian attempted words of comfort, but Kitty bounced back, suggested the best source for further updates would be Paddy or Sean himself.

He walked down to Hurley’s, bustling although the sun wasn’t yet up. He ran into lobstermen and fishermen carrying out coffees and doughnuts fresh from the kitchen, getting up from plates of eggs and bacon. One of them muttered he was having an egg-white omelet next time, and his friends roared with laughter.

Finian was suddenly starving. He sat alone at the back table in front of the harbor windows. He’d brought one of the folders of parish background materials that Father Callaghan had left behind in the rectory. It felt secret. Finian would have to make sure no one looked over his shoulder when he opened it.

Worried, impatient, he ordered coffee and a cider doughnut. Just as they arrived, Sean phoned him from his hospital bed. “I’m in bits, Fin.”

“That’s what Kitty said.”

“Kitty... ah, Kitty. Did she sound scared?”

“Annoyed. She says it’s your fault you’re hurt.”

“That’s my Kitty. Did I say *my* Kitty? Blast, Fin. It’s the drugs. I’m on morphine. I haven’t gone completely mad.” Sean paused, whether to picture pretty Kitty O’Byrne Doyle or merely to take a moment to cope with his pain, Fin didn’t know. “Things didn’t go as smoothly as I’d hoped, but all’s well that ends well, right, Fin?”

“Becan Kennedy?”

“It is his real name, in fact. He didn’t handle his end well, but he’d been on a razor wire for weeks—since he’d sought you out in March. He got cold feet when he talked to me. He thought he could extricate himself without our help.”

“Had you been investigating these smugglers?”

“For a while, but we had nothing. What Becan told me in March pointed us in the right direction.”

“Sean... the distillery... Declan...”

“In the clear. Not involved with the smuggling network. It was Becan’s idea to use the back field a couple times in February and early March, but they moved on to other sites. It had nothing to do with Bracken Distillers.”

“Thank God for that. The drop the other night—that was a ruse?”

“Yeah, Fin. A ruse. More like an ambush. They wanted Becan, and they wanted me.”

“How did you get hurt?”

“The bastards grabbed Becan, and I got good thrashing saving him, but the worst, Fin—the worst of it came when I ducked a gunshot and fell in your blasted health club.”

His health club. Finian could almost see Sean’s devil-may-care smile, but he heard a grown of pain and suspected his friend’s attempt at humor—this call—had cost him.

“I’ll let you get some rest,” Finian said. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“It’ll take another day or two before I’m glad of it.”

A long recovery lay ahead. “Will you go to Declan’s Cross to recuperate?”

“It would be a chance to further annoy Kitty,” Sean said, but his voice was weak, then the connection was lost.

Finian didn’t know if someone else clicked off the phone for his garda friend. He settled back in his chair and watched the sun come up over Rock Point harbor, the sky glowing with pinks and purples, a glorious June day ahead. He wondered where Colin Donovan was right now.

Not at a desk in Washington, for certain.

Finian opened the folder Father Callaghan had left him. Inside, right on top, was a newspaper clipping from the first week in June—just before Finian’s arrival in Rock Point. He scanned the article, which featured the arrest of a notorious arms trafficker, a wealthy Russian, Viktor Bulgov, at the auction of a Picasso painting in Los Angeles.

“Sources say Bulgov leaves behind a trail of bodies...”

Finian flipped to the next page in the folder. This time it was a printout of a news article on the internet, with a photograph of Viktor Bulgov at a hotel in Los Angeles. He was a handsome middle-aged man in a well-tailored suit. The report hinted that an intensive federal undercover operation had led to Bulgov’s arrest at the art auction. He was now in FBI custody.

Finian closed the folder and ordered another doughnut.

So this was what his new American friend’s work was.

Colin Donovan was an undercover FBI agent.

Undoubtedly he’d dived back into his undercover role to tie up loose ends with the Russian’s colleagues.

Despite his lack of sleep and his night of waiting and pacing, he felt surprisingly energized. Colin Donovan and Sean Murphy were very different men but both had tough, dangerous jobs—and Finian could see that part of his role as a priest was to be their spiritual advisor, but, most of all, he was their friend.

His doughnut arrived warm from the oven, sprinkled with cinnamon sugar. Pure heaven, he thought with a smile, ready to begin his first full day serving the people of Rock Point, Maine.

He looked out at the harbor, as lobster boats pattered out into the sunrise, and he knew that whatever trials and doubts lay ahead, he was where he was meant to be.

