



**KILLING IN
YOUR NAME**

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PROLOGUE

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Some say we regret the things we don't do in this life.

If only.

It was her fault. She let him slip past her unnoticed. If she'd been a little quicker, a little stronger, she could have caught him, dragged him back out the door. But she was slow and slight, and her arms were full of coats hastily shed and shoved her way.

She caught his eye though and dumped the coats. He glared back at her in a silent fury that spoke the words she'd heard from his lips many times:

'Go away, you're not my ma!'

Not his mother, that was true. But he had become her child in this last year, as surely as if she had borne him from her womb. Since the IRA visited death on their family and then the Catholic Church ripped apart what remained; she was the only mother he would ever have. And she was fifteen, Peter just two years younger.

He walked into the party room to her left and joined a small group of other boys, already voluminous with drink. Peter took a can of Tennent's, a colour image of a half-dressed woman printed on its side. It looked improbably large in his paw. He fumbled at the ring pull, finally opened the beer which foamed up. The yellow liquid ran down the side before he raised it to his mouth and drank.

Was that his first sip of beer? Yes, almost certainly. There were precious few opportunities for the boys in his home to socialise, even fewer chances of earning or stealing enough pocket money to buy a carry-out.

His eyes found her watching. He turned away with one hand jammed into his jeans pocket. From inside the party room came the swell of imbibed laughter, deep and grown-up.

There were men in there.

She'd been here to meet and greet them, had laid out the drinks table and snacks in advance of their arrival. Not for the first time: there'd been other parties like this. Some of the men were regulars, like the preacher. She'd seen him on the telly, but here he didn't wear the white dog collar. And there was the guy with the pinstripe suit, tall and softly spoken. She'd heard the others call him 'Counsellor'. He was usually here at the beginning. And there was the fat man. He was older, cheeks florid and always dressed in a three-piece suit. He carried a cane with a gold handle and he spoke with an accent that she couldn't place. Something between southern Irish and an upper-crust English drawl. These men she knew, but there were many she did not; they came and went.

What they had in common was their youth, and the power and wealth they exuded. That and the fact they were not much interested in her. She was developed enough to understand the intentions of men, and the baseness of their needs. These fellas were different. They hadn't come to the posh house off the Lisburn Road to meet young women or for the free drinks.

They'd come for the little boys.

A cold, dead thing pressed against her bare lower arms. She flinched and yelped. A man towered over her.

'When yer ready, love,' he said, and shoved his black leather jacket into her receiving hands. She muttered an apology and took the coat she'd thought was a carcass. She could smell the rich cow hide, and over it, the sweet fruit gum the man was chewing. She glanced up. He was tall, so big she had to tilt her head back to see his face. Strong jaw, mean mouth, a head of flaxen blonde hair worn swept back. And grey eyes, cold as the north Atlantic coast. She'd seen photos of SS officers in books. He fit the type exactly. But not just his features, it was the cruelty in his face. Beneath the sleazy slyness of this man she could feel it, like a cold river running through him and into her. There was badness here. She recoiled, but with nowhere to go, her back met the wall and she stopped dead. He clasped her cheeks in his hand, raised her face.

'You're a shy one, arn ya?' They were eye to eye. His voice was rich, but she felt the menace and knew the question needed no answer because it was really an accusation.

'Why are you so spooked? Do you know me?'

She didn't, but she knew that he was different from the others, rougher. His coat was leather, not tweed or camel hair. His accent had the twang and truncation of the Belfast streets.

She tried for a smile, not easy. He examined her like a new-found species, the grey of his eyes now almost fully black. Just like Jaws from the film she'd sneaked in to see at the ABC on Great Victoria Street. His eyes were exactly the same: black and empty. She glanced away and he followed her eyes.

Her baby brother, animated now, was talking to another boy maybe a year or so older, their faces visibly flushed with the drink. The older boy and Peter walked out of frame. Counsellor emerged and strode their way. His smile was full of affable welcome, but his eyes showed calculated concern as he took in her predicament.

'Sure, it's grand to see you,' he said, extended his arm. The move worked. The man with the black eyes released her face and they shook hands.

'A'reet,' he replied. Counsellor handed her two folded pound notes. Her wages, and her signal to go.

She took her payment, fingers trembling, mumbled a thanks. But Counsellor had already turned his back and was walking his guest towards the party room. Counsellor was big, but even at that, not quite as tall as the man with black, soulless eyes. She took a hanger from the rail in the cloakroom beneath the stairs and hung the black-eyed man's coat up. A hard weight, inside pocket, knocked her hand. She reached her fingers into the jacket, felt cold steel. Slowly, she pulled out a butterfly knife, long as her hand. She put it back, but instead of leaving she walked slowly to

the party room, the noise and the stink of tobacco smoke becoming thicker as she approached.

She peeped round the doorway. Groups of men with boys and youths, all drinking, most smoking, voices animated. The fat, old man with the funny accent was in an armchair in the corner, near the roaring open fire. A boy was seated on one of his boiled-egg thighs and the man's plump hand was rested on one of the boy's knees. She searched from face to face, looking for Peter. She spotted him, all alone again.

'Peter! I'm taking you home,' she shouted and started towards him—

An iron grip on her upper arm, hard enough to make her shriek, but nobody heard it. She turned to see Counsellor's flushed face in her own, his eyes wide and angry. She tried to pull away, but it was impossible; he was so strong, and she was so weak.

'Out!' he snarled, small globs of his spittle hitting her mouth as he said the words. Then she was dragged off, helpless to resist. She stole a final look at the room. The big, black eyed shark was on the move, headed to where her little brother stood alone.

Counsellor opened the front door and shoved her out hard enough to send her sprawling down the front steps and to her knees. Her threadbare coat followed and snagged in a big shrub.

'You're sacked, you stupid little bitch. Don't come back,' he hissed, casting a furtive look both ways. The halogen-lit street was the model of silent suburbia and answered not. He closed the front door with a rattle of the knocker. She watched first the lantern light over the small

porch extinguish and then the hallway light. She got up, warmth and pain from her knees, thought about chucking a rock through the front window. Instead, she pulled her wretched coat off the bush and shuffled to the front gate, tears coursing down her face.

Peter was in there, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was just a girl, a weak nobody. And worst of all, she'd let him in. That man, who in her heart she knew was ten times, a hundred times worse than all the rest; she'd opened the door and let that evil man in. She reached into her blouse pocket where she'd put the precious pound notes. She scrunched the currency into a ball, raised her hand to throw it away and then she stopped.

Because this wasn't the movies, and this year she'd almost saved enough for the fare to England, enough for both of them. She returned the money to her pocket. She could feel the rage and the shame and the hopelessness scorch her throat and settle deep down in her fledgling breast where it had already started to burn.

She shuffled off, the wind slicing at her tear-wet face. When she closed her eyes all she could see was the great white predator on a course for her baby brother. She raised her face to the cold heavens and screamed, and her cry was swallowed up by the black Belfast night.

PART ONE

SKELETONS OF SOCIETY



CHAPTER ONE

Belfast, Northern Ireland, present day
Monday 17th December

The dead are silent in their graves, but at night they speak to Owen Sheen.

His brother Kevin, telling him to run after the football as it skimmed and bounced down the gloaming Sailortown street in Belfast so many years before, seconds before a car bomb exploded and obliterated him. He asks when Sheen will come visit him; tend his grave in Milltown Cemetery. He tells him that it's a disgrace; overgrown and forgotten.

John Fryer, the escaped IRA lunatic he'd hunted down last summer, speaks. His words, as always, an answer to Sheen's question when he finally cornered him: *Did you kill my brother?*

Maybe I did. I did so much but don't remember now.

Sheen had squeezed the trigger anyway. His own ineptitude with firearms was all that had stopped him from murdering Fryer. But the bullet he never shot had put a hole in his personal code; he'd killed a part of himself when he

tried to shoot that unarmed man. He drags deep on the hot stub of his roll-up and winces at the burn, crushes it. The smoking is new, but it caught hold fast. This was John Fryer's lifetime addiction, and unless he quit, it would become his. Another voice speaks up, this one faint and far-off, and this one is worst of all.

What's my name, Owen Sheen? What's my name?

That's the voice of the boy.

His team had searched the bogland of County Monaghan and found the remains of the youth, Jimmy McKenna was his name, murdered and Disappeared there long ago by John Fryer. But no sooner had McKenna been found than another shout echoed across the drained bog. Another shout, and against all odds it was another body. It was decapitated, mutilated and buried in a wooden cask. And this boy was younger. But the child with no name was a chance discovery and was officially no business of Owen Sheen. As they were over the border in the Irish Republic, the Gardaí took control, and Sheen had walked away. But the boy had found him, time and again.

'What you going to do about it, Sheen?' he asked the empty room.

If the past three months were anything to go on, damn all was the answer. The Northern Ireland Assembly had stalled, and with it, the administrative arm of the Northern Ireland Office that oversaw his work with the Police Service of Northern Ireland was effectively out of action. Since locating and returning the remains of Jimmy McKenna, he and his team had been put out to pasture. Paid to wait in limbo for the politicians to learn how to play nice.

He checked the digital glow of his bedside clock. It

was just shy of 6.30 a.m. and outside his Laganside loft apartment he could hear the stirrings of another working week beginning for some. Sheen got up; he'd sat around for long enough. He scraped his car keys and phone off the table by the door. He checked for recent messages or missed calls. But it was one name he hoped to see. He had not spoken to Aoife McCusker in person since the day he had visited her in hospital in August. Not spoken at all since their stilted phone call about three months ago. A new distance and a thus far failed promise from him to call again. And, of course, not a whisper from Aoife. He pocketed his phone, glided down the stairs. She blamed him, probably fairly, for what had befallen her since the summer. But this week would be different; by the end of it he'd have got in touch, for better or worse.

He navigated the side streets and the slip roads, and, once on the M1, he let the Vauxhall Insignia Turbo go, driving south-west. Sheen was headed for the western edge of County Monaghan, a part of the Irish Republic that extended north and was flanked by Northern Ireland on two sides. The bogland, where he'd spent most of August excavating, was just across Monaghan's western border. He let his hands and feet do the driving. God knows they knew the way. At Dungannon the motorway disappeared, like it had given up as impossible its attempt to extend modernity into the wilds of County Armagh and south Tyrone. Sheen adjusted his speed, looked out for farmers in tractors, and chewed over the names of the approaching townships as he ate up the miles: Aughnacloy, ford of the stone; Clogher, meaning stony place; Fivemiletown, originally known as Baile na Lorgan, meaning townland of the long ridge.

The gradient steepened and the relief changed from arable land to upland bog. If he kept going he would reach the village of Welshtown, the last settlement on the Northern Ireland side of the border in County Tyrone, and the place where he and his team had been based in August. Beyond it, the land changed seamlessly into County Monaghan, and the Irish Republic. The lonely desolation of Coleman's bog was all that awaited the wanderer from here to where the land dropped once more, leading eventually into Monaghan town. Sheen drove on, hardly adjusting his speed, beams on full. There'd been a lot of talk about the threat of a hard border, but talk was all it would ever be in this wild land. The idea of a border was as meaningless here now as it had been when they first drew a line in the map. Sheen pulled in and stopped at a passing place.

He got out, breathed in the damp morning air and listened to the rustling sounds of the darkness which greeted him, as he changed his shoes for the stout hiking boots he kept on a plastic sheet in his boot, and pulled on the thermal-lined waterproof rolled up beside them. The blue beanie hat he kept in the pocket was still there and he pulled it down over his ears. He felt in the other pocket of the jacket and found the snug shaft of the powerful little Maglite. He turned it on and off, and in the light he saw the short-handle shovel he had carried with him every day while searching for the body of the young man, Jimmy McKenna. He had rarely used it on the dig, the main forensic work had been carried out by excavation experts or heavy-duty earth movers, but like the leather Brief of St Anthony he had round his neck, a gift from Aoife McCusker, it was a talisman. And it had worked.

He unlatched the silver stainless steel gate by the road and closed it again behind him before starting up the dirt track.

Twenty minutes later he stopped. The thin path he'd been on had faded away and the land dissolved into an expanse of waterlogged swamp. Somewhere close by was where they had finally unearthed the body of McKenna. He veered due south, searching for the place where the second cry of 'Body found!' had been raised, searching for the marker he needed. Sheen squinted in the half-light at the excavation trenches his teams had made in the peat bog adjacent. The metal spikes they had used to tape off the area were still impaled waist height in the earth, though they should have been removed. He stopped at the dead-looking tree, its blackened arms stretched from west to east, and jumped down the ridge to reach its exposed roots. The cavity was still visible under its trunk where the cask containing the body had been discovered.

He could see rust deposits where the metal bands of the cask had been, and the vague impression of the wood in the sheltered core of the cave. He reached into the cavity, dug his hand into the cold, wet peat, felt it embed under his nails and cool his blood and bones instantly. He took out a handful and raised it to his face, breathed its rich, nearly disinfectant odour. He tossed the loose earth into the hole. Someone had dumped a child here, to cover unspeakable things. Sheen stood up and clapped his hands clean of earth. This was not his manor. Technically, not even his country. But he'd discovered the body and that made it his responsibility; he would never be able to let it go.

'I found you and now I am going to find out who did this to you,' said Sheen. A muffled pop then another in quick

succession some distance away, coming from the east. The shotgun fired again, both barrels. Sheen scanned the horizon but couldn't see a soul. He moved off and then saw a rabbit, followed by another bouncing from one grassy knoll to another before both disappeared into the earth. The guns barked again as Sheen trudged back across the border. He wasn't the only person out hunting at dawn after all.