

## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

The further they moved away from Shannon airport, the narrower and more treacherous the roads became. Potholes, tyre indentations, and irregular surfacing made for an interesting journey requiring the full attention of the driver. At one point, a painted word on the faded tarmac warned drivers to slow down as they approached a bend. At the curve's apex, a second sign read: *SLOWER!*

Jimmy Bliss chuckled. Alongside him, Chandler shook her head and laughed – one of her witch's cackles. It was a lot easier on the ear than the one that sounded like a seal being machine gunned. Either way, she had enjoyed the humour of the sign as much as he had. Whoever had painted it certainly knew their audience.

Little more than a mile afterwards, Bliss had to decrease his speed and pull as far over to the left as he could to allow a fuel tanker followed by two further HGV vehicles to ease past on the other side of the road. Bliss hoped they wouldn't encounter a tractor or slow-moving lorry going their way. If they did, their hire car could be trapped behind it for miles.

The pair were detectives with the Peterborough Major Crime Unit in Cambridgeshire, England. Neither was on duty; Chandler having decided to accept Bliss's invitation to join him on one of his regular sojourns over to Ireland to see his mother. This was her first visit, and he was glad of the company.

They drove on listening to a radio show playing non-stop tunes from the seventies and eighties – Bliss's era, for sure. A rare deep cut by It Bites held him captive. They rounded another tight bend just as the track reached its crescendo outro, and were immediately confronted by a squat-looking Range Rover hurtling towards them. Bliss sucked in air as the two vehicles flashed by each other, no more than the width of a drink coaster between door mirrors. He'd instinctively stamped hard on the brake, the unfamiliar Ford Focus slewing and fishtailing before he was able to correct it and come to an abrupt halt.

As far as Bliss could tell, the big SUV had not slowed at all. He tried to catch its plate in the rear-view mirror, but as his eyes focussed it disappeared from view around the bend. With his heart beating out the kind of fast rhythm John Bonham would have

been proud of, the Del Amitri song *Driving With The Brakes On* drifted out of the speakers to break the tension.

‘Jesus-fucking-Christ!’ Chandler said, her hand pressed hard to her chest.

Bliss could only nod in agreement. ‘Yeah, best get that out of your system before we reach my mum’s place,’ he said. ‘Blasphemy earns you a clip round the lughole these days.’

She turned to look over her shoulder out of the rear window. ‘What an arsehole! That maniac didn’t give a shit what became us. Just drove on as if nothing had happened.’

‘Best get that out of your system, too. Swearing also warrants a clump.’

‘Is there anything that doesn’t provoke your slap-happy mother these days?’

Chandler asked as Bliss got the car going again.

He gave that some thought before responding. ‘You can talk about Jesus, Mary and Joseph, provided you don’t offer them up in place of a curse. That’s considered slap worthy. As is an actual curse, of course. I find the best way to avoid being beaten to death is to keep quiet and nod or shake your head as required.’

Chandler swatted his arm. ‘Don’t say that! I’m sure Mumma Bliss is nowhere near as bad as you make her out to be. Just because she’s hooked up with a group of widows and widowers who happen to be happy-clappies, doesn’t mean she’s been fully indoctrinated.’

‘She didn’t need a great deal of conversion. She was born here in Ireland, remember. Grew up in a deeply Catholic household, as it happens. Admittedly she lapsed long before she met my old man, but it’s always been there. Simmering just beneath the surface. Now the cult have her at their mercy, I’m not sure we can save the old girl.’

Bliss earned himself another swat of rebuke for that. He thought they were done, when Chandler said, ‘Did you breathe in back there as that car flashed past us?’

He shook his head. ‘Of course not. Breathe in? What would be the point of that?’

She nodded. Was silent for a good couple of minutes.

‘You do know you’re on the inside of the car, yes?’

‘I didn’t bloody well breathe in, all right? I’m not a nutjob.’

During the gaps between roadside trees and unkempt hedgerow, they saw the land over to their left was relatively flat all the way across to the cliffs and the choppy waters of the north Atlantic Ocean beyond. Having avoided being mangled by a snarling SUV, Bliss was looking forward to spending some time close to the sea. His thoughts still on the near collision, he spotted the swirling fireball sign of a Maxol service station. He glanced at the on-board SatNav before flicking the indicator.

‘Why are we stopping?’ Chandler asked. ‘You’ve got plenty of fuel.’

Bliss slowed and pulled off the road onto the almost derelict-looking four pump forecourt. ‘I know that. I’m stopping to ask for directions.’

‘Isn’t that why you paid extra for the SatNav?’

‘That was to get us to this point. But according to my dear old mum, GPS doesn’t register her new address for some reason. Previous visitors have been known to disappear off the face of the planet entirely, never to be seen again. Which is why, when I spoke to her the other day, she told me to stop here and ask Joe the way. According to her, he gives great directions. Provided I don’t start off by asking for the best way to get there.’

‘Why not?’

‘Evidently, he’ll scratch his chin for a few seconds and then tell me he wouldn’t start from here.’

Bliss climbed out of the car and walked across to the scruffy hut-like building that hunched alongside the pumps. It looked as if it had strained in defiance against the biting and often cruel ocean winds and rain for centuries; neglected since its foundations were laid. The forlorn-looking station looked like the kind of place that had many a tale to tell if only it could speak. He pulled open the juddering door and stepped inside.

Behind the counter, a man with thick black hair and a thicker, blacker beard stood holding an oil-stained rag to his head. Blood poured from whatever wound lay beneath the makeshift compress, claret runnels dripping from his eyelids and sliding down the side of his nose. Bliss regarded him in alarm.

‘Bloody hell! What happened here? Are you okay, pal?’ *Stupid question*, he reflected.

Wincing, the man peered at him through eyes that vacillated between blinking blood away and squinting at the newcomer. ‘I’m grand. Just grand.’

‘Excuse me for saying so, but you don’t look it.’

‘It’s nothing, really. Worse than it looks, let me tell you.’

Bliss thought of the Black Knight in the *Holy Grail*, the Monty Python film.

*Don’t say “Tis but a scratch”, he thought, or I might collapse.*

‘Bastards tried to rob me,’ the man went on. ‘Couple of wee fellahs acting big and clever because they had a length of pipe about them. I soon saw the little shites off.’

Bliss thought back to his brief encounter on the road. ‘Black Range Rover?’ he asked.

The man’s face became sharper. ‘How do you..? Did you see them?’

‘They almost wiped me out on a bend. Did you get a plate?’

‘No such luck. They’d gone by the time I got over there to look outside the door.’

Bliss pulled out his mobile. ‘I’ll call the Garda. And an ambulance. That wound might be worse than you thought.’

‘No, don’t be troubling yourself on my account. I fought them off, so they stole nothing. Your man just whacked me with the pipe. It’s fine. I’m fine. Anyway, I already called for both.’

He pulled the rag away from his head and inspected it. Though his hair was matted with blood, the flow from the laceration did appear to have slowed to a trickle.

‘Are you Joe, by any chance?’ Bliss said.

The man’s bloodied face brightened. ‘That I am. And how would you be knowing that about me?’

‘I’m told you’re the man to ask if I want to know how to find a place called Churchquarter here in Ballyfort.’

The man he now knew to be Joe immediately launched into a series of directions, speaking so rapidly that Bliss had to slow him down, back him up, and ask him to repeat it all over again step by step. With the route eventually in his head, Bliss looked the man up and down one last time.

‘Are you sure you’re going to be all right, Joe? You might have a concussion. Maybe I should wait with you until the emergency services arrive.’

‘No, no. I’m grand, I tell you. You be on your way. I’ll fetch myself a cup of tea and wait. They’re busy men and women, but they’ll be along soon enough. The likes of

those bastards who thrashed me will have to come harder than that if they're going to hurt Joe McGinty.'

On hearing the name, Bliss badly wanted to know if he was Paddy's brother and to ask after the goat, but he didn't know if that might be deemed offensive. Instead he said, 'Look, I'm grateful for the directions, Joe. And I'm perfectly happy to wait with you in case shock sets in.'

The hirsute man gave a wide grin, surprisingly white and even teeth beaming through the tangled beard. 'I'm as right as rain. You be on your way, and I'll wait for the Garda and paramedic. Off you go, now. I'm away for my tea and maybe a couple of Paracetamol. And enjoy your visit.'

Bliss felt bad about leaving him, but people had their own ways of dealing with stressful incidents, and as a copper he had learned to respect that. The man did seem to be steady on his feet, he was talking and thinking coherently, and showing no obvious sign of dizziness or sickness.

'Fair enough. I'd hang around if I thought I could help the police, but all we saw was a black Range Rover. No plate, nor the occupants. Sorry.'

'Not at all. I saw more than enough of those runts to describe them. You be on your way, now.'

Bliss left him to it, though he guessed the wait for an emergency response might be a lengthy one. As he followed the new map inside his head, he told Chandler all about it. She was as concerned as he had been, but he genuinely believed Joe would be fine. The paramedic would patch him up properly, and he was certainly *compos mentis* enough to describe the attempted robbery in detail. Pushing the matter to the back of his mind, he took the second turning on the left and carried on until they were almost at the sea front, before another left and then a sharp right brought them to a small stone cottage at the foot of a steep hill.

'This is it,' Bliss said, looking across at his friend. He switched off the engine. 'Are you sure you're fully prepared to meet the formidable Mrs Jacqui Bliss?'

Chandler gave a single nod. 'Jimmy, I've put up with you and your bullshit all these years, so I don't think your mother is going to intimidate me.'

‘And so it begins,’ he said on a sigh, throwing open the door. ‘She already has you right where she wants you.’

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Ballyfort, on the County Kerry northern ridge of coastline, lay less than ten miles from the bungalow Bliss’s mother had bought when she first moved from Spain to Ireland following the death of her husband, Dennis. It bothered Jimmy more than he cared to admit that she had moved closer to her congregation of people whose spouses had passed away, but he knew that said more about his sceptical and protective nature than anything his mother had confessed to.

When he rose early the following morning, a pale-yellow dawn creeping in like a trespasser, the first thing Bliss did when he was ready was to go for a walk. He was delighted to find a path down to the beach, its entrance less than a hundred yards away from the cottage. He had it to himself as far as he could tell, which made him feel even better about the discovery. Further along to his right, the sandy beach gave way to inlets that were both rocky and sheer as they climbed towards the clifftop, but here you could walk right down to the sea and take a dip if you were so inclined.

He wasn’t.

Bliss had never been a huge fan of sand, not even when he was a kid and his parents had taken a coach into Margate on the Kent coast, or to Southend in Essex. He loved the water, though, and found the sound of waves crashing in to shore incredibly soothing. His gaze took in the frothing white spume, and the roiling grey breakers in front of him. The southern edge of County Clare on the other side of the wide bay peeked through a low mist already being burnt off by the approaching sun. A harsh wind rattled in off the north Atlantic along the channel, back along the route he had driven in from Shannon. Bliss breathed in the salt air, ignoring the spray that settled on him like a second skin. He began to relax for the first time in weeks.

Out of nowhere came a memory of the previous night. The thought brought a smile to his lips. For a full thirty seconds after his mother had pulled open her front door,

he had stood in complete silence while she embraced Chandler, almost pulling his friend and colleague off her feet.

‘Remember me?’ he’d eventually said. ‘Your only son.’

‘And that’s why you’ll always be my favourite,’ she shot back at him.

They’d hugged, and when they went inside, Bliss said, ‘I’m only here for some proper local Guinness, not to see you.’

His mother had immediately picked up a large glass of white wine from the coffee table in her living room. ‘Beware the demon drink,’ she replied, raising it to her lips.

His laughter had been tinged with a relief he did his best to conceal. His mother was getting on, she lived alone, and he worried about her physical health and mental wellbeing. There had been one or two telephone conversations between them that had disturbed and worried him, leaving Bliss wondering about her memory. Yet subsequent calls had gone well, and even though he’d tested her she had passed with flying colours.

He saw her as often as he could, so her physical condition seldom took him by surprise. On this occasion she appeared a little less robust, and there was more of a shuffle to her gait now than he remembered from previous visits. On the whole, he saw nothing to be concerned about, and the three of them had enjoyed a lovely evening together. His mother and Chandler had warmed to each other immediately – as he had known they would – and at times he felt excluded from their bond. It didn’t bother him in the slightest. In some ways, it made him feel all the more comfortable.

As he made his way back to the cottage, Bliss met Chandler coming in the opposite direction. ‘Your mum reckoned you’d probably be down here’ she said. ‘Says you have a thing for water. She’s making breakfast and wants you cleaned up before you sit down at the table.’

‘She’s a tyrant,’ he said.

‘She’s a treasure, and you know it.’

‘Each to their own, Pen. Listen, before we head back, I wanted to talk to you about something. It’s about last night. Our near miss and what happened at the petrol station niggled me while I was trying to sleep. I knew something was not quite right, but then it clicked into place. Thinking about it again this morning, it still doesn’t make sense to me.’

‘What doesn’t?’

Chandler had yet to apply any makeup, and her hair was being blown all over the place. She looked tired having spent the previous day at work, which was followed by an hour’s drive, their flight, and then another ninety minutes on the road. Yet for some reason she looked perfect, and Bliss wished he could encapsulate the moment on film or a digital device.

‘Jimmy?’ She was frowning at him. ‘Where did you go?’

Bliss shook his head. ‘Nowhere, I’m fine. My problem with what happened is this: you saw that place last night. From the outside, at least. A crappy little shithole at the arse-end of nowhere. Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’

‘So why would a couple of blokes in what looked like a pretty new Range Rover want to rob it? What’s the best they could hope to take from a run-down petrol station like that? They’d be lucky to get enough to fill the tank in the bloody great SUV they were driving. Does that make any sense to you?’

She took a moment to reply, but Bliss clocked the quizzical look forming on her face. ‘Now that you mention it, it does strike me as a bit odd. Maybe the car was stolen?’

‘Same deal,’ Bliss said. ‘A couple of blokes steal a nice little earner like that and then stop off to rob the till of some dive of a petrol station? No, I’m not having that. The more I think about it the more suss it sounds.’

‘I suppose. What do you intend to do about it? I assume you’re not going to let it drop and just enjoy the weekend with your mother?’

Bliss frowned. ‘You know me so well. Too well. I thought I’d maybe just give the Garda a bell and see what the SP is. Might be nothing, but you never know.’

‘Yeah. The difference is, I could happily live with not knowing. You’re like a dog near a lamppost, straining on its lead to sniff around.’

‘Charming. I’ll just call them. What harm can it do?’

Chandler puffed out her cheeks.

‘What?’ he said.

‘I was just wondering why, with all your years of experience, you still didn’t know they are the most famous of famous last words.’

After breakfast – enough to feed the entire Major Crimes squad back home – Bliss obtained the number for the closest Garda station in Tarbert, a town they had passed through on the way in from Shannon the previous night. He explained that he was a Detective Inspector, on a weekend trip with his DS colleague to visit his mother. His call was passed through several hands before he managed to speak with a fourth equally bemused Garda officer. It took a further twenty minutes of back and forth for Bliss to learn that there had been no report of an attempted robbery at the service station. Not only that, but neither had a paramedic been requested. No emergency call had been made.

With his mother at a church meeting – she'd done her best to persuade Chandler along, having given up on him many years ago, but Penny was equally adamant about not wishing to attend – the pair discussed the incident and the fresh news.

'I don't know what to make of it,' he said. 'The man blatantly lied to me. Why would he do that, do you suppose?'

Chandler wrinkled her nose as if in distaste. 'I hate to mention it and raise the awful spectre, but who are people in this country most likely to fear besides us from the UK?'

'You mean the IRA? That thought had crossed my mind. I mean, whatever version they're on now. I know of dissidents calling themselves the Real IRA, the New IRA, and even Continuity IRA, but while none of them have quite the cachet of the Provisionals, these men and women are still treated with respect. Actually, it's more like fear. The kind people back home have for our own gangsters. But, yeah, you could be right. And yet...'

Chandler finished the thought for him. 'What would even the Tufty Club version of a paramilitary force want with a dump like Joe's petrol station?'

'Exactly. Something stinks.'

'And you intend to do what about it? We have no authority here.'

'I'm not sure. But it occurred to me that the friendly, thoughtful thing to do would be to pop in to see how he was doing. Ask how he's feeling, what the police made of it.'

Chandler checked her phone. 'We have an hour before your mum gets back. No time like the present, eh?'

They retraced their route back to the service station. The previous evening it had been nearing dusk by the time they'd reached Ballyfort, but even in the dazzling sunlight with a clear blue sky above, Joe's place still looked bedraggled and close to caving in on itself. Water stains discoloured the exterior white walls, chunks of whatever coating had been sprayed on the underlying brick falling away in bubbled clumps. The paintwork on the door and window frames was back to the original wood in some places, fresh flakes creating a small mound on the ground outside. The forecourt surrounding the pump island was riven with cracks and crevices, creating a marbled effect, with growths of weeds poking through to exacerbate the unevenness.

Two vehicles were parked outside when Bliss and Chandler arrived. A rusted Toyota pick-up lay like an exhausted dog on tyres so flat and bald they might as well have been punctured flotation devices for kids. Next to it was a gleaming blue Beemer with dark windows. Bliss eyed both closely, wondering what it was about them that caused a nagging voice to whisper in his ear.

'Stay here,' he said. 'Keep one eye out for these two if they leave before me, the other on the road. I'm not sure what you might notice, but this place doesn't feel right to me.'

For once, Chandler didn't argue. Bliss pulled open the door into the station, remembering to heave because it got stuck halfway. A small bell jangled overhead, something he didn't recall hearing the night before. He didn't know what he thought he might encounter inside, but the place immediately fell silent. If there had been a piano playing, the honky-tonk tune would have stopped mid-chord. As it was, the hubbub of conversation became muted, and three faces turned his way.

One of the men wore a green waxed jacket, his trousers tucked into Wellington boots. Beneath the jacket his checked shirt was buttoned to the neck. He leaned against a door marked STORE. The other wore a stylish navy suit, his shoes polished to within an inch of their lives. Resting with one hand on the wall, his legs crossed, there was more than a hint of snake oil salesman about him. Joe stood behind the counter, stiff and upright. He looked none the worse for wear, though his hairline was colouring up nicely.

'Sorry to interrupt,' Bliss said. 'Please, don't mind me. You carry on with your chat. I can wait.'

‘Not at all,’ Joe said, placing his hands on the counter. ‘What can I do for you today?’

‘Do you remember me from last night? I pulled over to ask for directions shortly after your bit of bother. I thought about what had happened and wondered how you were doing this morning.’

Joe sucked air in before he spoke. ‘Of course. And you came back just to enquire after my health? That’s very kind of you. I was just telling the fellahs here all about it. Terrible thing. Shocking. But I’m as right as rain this morning. Got a big thumbs-up from the paramedic, says I showed no signs of concussion.’

The lie had come easily. Bliss pressed for another. ‘And the police? Sorry, the Garda. What did they have to say about it?’

‘Not a lot they could do. They’ll keep an eye out for the Rover, but based on the details I was able to give them, they said I might not hear back from them any time soon.’

Bliss nodded. ‘That’s a shame. Still, nothing was taken, and you don’t look as if it shook you up too much.’

‘No, I’m grand. Grand.’ He nodded to emphasise. His two customers did likewise. They couldn’t have looked more ill at ease if they’d tried.

‘I’m glad to see you’re okay. Take care, Joe.’

‘And you. Thanks for dropping by now.’

Back in the car, Bliss was intrigued and keen to learn more. ‘Now I know something is rotten here,’ he said after filling Chandler in. ‘Tell you what, I’m going to drive off, but I’m going to try to find somewhere close by where we can keep an eye on the place for a while.’

‘You’re kidding, right? Why, what do you think is going on?’

‘Something illegal. My radar is going haywire, Pen. Out here it could be as minor as selling off red diesel to avoid the fuel duty, maybe some knocked-off booze or cigarettes. Or it could be arms, maybe even drugs.’

‘In this shithole?! Why on earth would anybody do that kind of business in a khazi like this?’

Bliss smiled. ‘Precisely because it *is* a khazi like this. Who would suspect it?’

He drove a half a mile up the road before finding a spot where he could turn around. He'd noted a narrow lane that seemed to have an upward curve leading back towards the service station. He took it and drove slowly – there was room for only a single vehicle with few wider passing opportunities. Beneath a canopy of trees he spotted a flat area large enough for the car to sit out of the way in prime position to overlook Joe's place without being observed from below.

The Beemer was already gone by the time Bliss parked up. For some reason, its absence shook a thought loose. 'I know why those motors looked out of place,' he said.

Chandler turned to him. 'Do tell.'

'Neither of them was parked correctly at the pumps. Their fuel caps were on the opposite side. They weren't there to top up.'

'Perhaps they heard what happened to Joe and stopped by to see if he was all right.'

Bliss nodded. 'He did say they'd been talking about it. But... I'm not buying it. That may be where their conversation took them, but I don't think they were there out of the goodness of their hearts.'

About to reply, Chandler nodded in the direction of the station. 'That crappy little shithole at the arse-end of nowhere as you described it, is a lot busier than either of us thought it would be.'

As the Toyota's driver exited the station and walked across to his truck, two more vehicles pulled onto the forecourt. It wasn't big enough for more than three or four at a time, but a clean and new-looking Alfa Romeo pulled up behind the pick-up. The driver of an olive green Land Rover didn't even bother to pretend; he climbed out and left his motor where it was. The two newcomers entered the station together.

Bliss glanced across at Chandler. 'What do you reckon now?'

'I think you might be onto something. I just don't know what.'

'I reckon we can forget about the red diesel. That truck driver wasn't carrying booze or cigarettes, either, and I definitely didn't spot a crate of AK-47s being loaded onto the back of his four-by-four.'

'Drugs?' Chandler said.

'That'd be my guess, yes.'

‘Which makes our next move to call the Garda and inform them of our suspicions, right?’

Bliss hesitated. ‘Not exactly.’

‘Of course not. And why’s that?’

‘Because there was something else I noticed about that Beemer we first saw. The penny just dropped. There was a sticker in the back window. It was for the *New Christian Mission*.’

Chandler’s deep frown spoke volumes.

Bliss put his friend out of her misery. ‘The New Christian Mission is my mum’s congregation.’

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Bliss’s mother was at home by the time they arrived back. She was pottering around in the kitchen, the delicious aroma of warm cookies filling the room. ‘Did you enjoy your drive?’ she asked them as they settled down at the small breakfast table.

‘Yep. Blew a few cobwebs away,’ Bliss said.

‘I’d have thought you’d be wanting to rest this morning, what with all the travelling you did yesterday.’

‘You’ll have a hard job shifting me from the sofa the rest of the day. I ache where I don’t even have body.’

His mother tutted and shook her head. ‘You and your nonsense. How you put up with him I don’t know, Penny.’

‘It’s a struggle, Mrs Bliss. But he’s a force of nature when he gets going.’

‘Ah, now, I can’t be doing with all that Mrs Bliss nonsense. It’s Jacqui to you, remember, sweetheart.’

Bliss grinned at Chandler, then made a point of sniffing the air. ‘Smells great, mum. Chocolate chip?’

She nodded. ‘With a few cranberries thrown in.’

‘Great. That’s my five a day sorted.’ He waited a few seconds before taking a machete to the can of worms he’d been avoiding. ‘So, how was your session with the cult today?’

‘Charlie Manson send his best,’ she said without looking up.

He chuckled. It was a great comeback, and if nothing else it told him his mother still had her wits about her. He prodded a little deeper. ‘We saw a car today that had the same sticker you have on your motor. The one about your Mission. A royal blue BMW, tinted windows. Looks like a pimp’s wheels.’

This time her eyes met his. ‘Oh, yes? And where was this?’

‘Back along the road we came in on. Near Joe’s petrol station.’

Bliss saw the immediate change in her features. He also noticed a tremor in her hand. ‘Mum, what is it? You know whose car that is?’

‘It belongs to our Minister. We were told he was off to Shannon today on important business. Was he driving by, or did he stop at Joe’s?’

‘He stopped. Mum, what’s going on? You look concerned.’

‘I’ve heard bad things about that place, Jimmy. Oh, he’s fine for directions, but there’s talk in the village about Joe and what goes on there.’

‘Such as?’

‘People tell different stories. Some think Joe’s an illegal bookie. Others have said they know for certain he organises illegal dog fights. One or two think he runs a hare coursing business on the side. I don’t know for sure about any of them, but that’s not the first time Minister Finnegan has been seen mixing with bad company.’

Bliss sensed there was more to it. He and Chandler had jumped all over the prospect of drugs being the most likely enterprise taking place behind closed doors at the service station, but any of the three suggestions his mother had made were plausible. Her concern seemed to deepen, and now it was his turn to feel anxious.

‘Mum, why don’t you sit down and tell us about it?’

‘Tell you what?’ Her head snapped up, moisture in her eyes.

‘I can see there’s something bothering you. If you’d rather speak to me alone, Pen won’t mind going for a walk. But I need you to talk to me, because now I’m worried about you.’

He could understand her reluctance, but whatever was bothering her clearly overshadowed everything else flitting through her mind. Eventually, his mother nodded and joined them at the table. She took a deep breath and began.

‘I didn’t want to say anything, Jimmy. On the other hand, I didn’t *not* want to, either. Perhaps it’s better it came up this way. I might not have had the nerve otherwise.’

Bliss reached across to grasp his mother’s hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze. ‘Mum, you can tell me anything. You know that. I won’t judge you. Spit it out, then we’ll make the world right again over a cup of tea.’

His mother nodded. ‘All right. But not that perfumed shite you like.’

He laughed. ‘It’s just Earl Grey, Mum. Not exactly decadent these days. Come on, stop prevaricating and tell me what’s wrong.’

‘Oh, you and your fancy words. The thing is, I don’t actually know if there is something wrong. Not really. I know, but I don’t know. Does that make sense?’

‘Coming from you, absolutely.’

Chandler nudged him with her elbow. ‘You carry on, Jacqui. Don’t mind your idiot son.’

When he heard his mother’s story, Bliss wished he was more shocked by it. The truth was, he’d not only suspected, he and his mother had touched on the subject before. He’d previously kept the conversations light and breezy, as if he was joshing more than offering a serious warning. Now he cursed himself for not having done more.

Minister Finnegan had acted with great patience, as all good conmen do. After the initial ingratiation period, came the ad-hoc requests for charitable donations to the Mission. These allowed the organisation to continue with its own good work. “God’s work”, as the man always put it. This was soon followed by the dire need to fix a roof here, carry out some plumbing there. Donations became more regular, to the point where direct debits were set up to make monthly payments into a repairs and maintenance fund. Eventually, Finnegan moved on to the grand idea of forming a commune. Widows and widowers living cheek by jowl, offering support to one another, friendship, companionship, and potentially even more. The proposal came as part of a major venture prescribing a land purchase and the building of two dozen homes around a new church.

Even in the Christian world such things do not come cheap. Finnegan's idea was simple and presented skilfully. All the congregation members had to do was release a substantial amount of equity on their homes, and then sign the funds over to the Ministry. The contracts of the release allowed people to remain in their homes for five years, at which point they would sell up and move into their brand new commune.

'It sounded grand,' Jacqui said, though regret hung heavy in her eyelids. 'The people I've met since I moved here have been such a great help to me, Jimmy. I know you took the piss, but they got me through my grieving process after your father passed. They're good people. I have no issues with them at all.'

'But you do with your Minister. You've realised he's not all he claims to be.'

'There's been talk. He lived like a church mouse when he first moved to the area, but then all of a sudden, he was driving around in that flash car, wearing smart suits, and he moved out of the tiny little flat he had at the Ministry into a big new house. He claimed he came into some money due to a bequeathment, but it was what he did with the money that bothered me to begin with. Afterwards, the rumours about his little visits to Joe's garage spread around the village, and we picked up on it.'

'Did any of you confront him about it?'

'Not confront, but it did get mentioned.'

'And?'

'He admitted to a minor human weakness, but assured us he had it under control. From what you told me, it doesn't sound as if he has at all.'

'You think whatever he's doing there is minor, Mum? Nothing on a larger scale?'

'Such as?'

'Drugs, maybe?'

She pulled the folds of her cardigan together at her chest. 'Oh, good God, no. The Minister? No, Jimmy, I think you must have that wrong.'

Bliss was beyond caring. His mother was being taken for a ride. The question was, how far had their journey taken her.

'Mum, I need to ask you something. Please don't be embarrassed. I just need you to tell me the truth, no matter how bad it is.'

'You want to know if I took out the equity and signed it over to the Ministry?'

He nodded.

She smiled for the first time in about an hour. ‘I may be losing one or two of my marbles, Jimmy, but they’re not all gone yet. I’d never have done so without speaking to you first.’

‘I thought that might be the case. Thing is, these people play the long game. They’re okay waiting for those marbles to drop until you do reach the point where you’re taken in by the spiel. Your man Finnegan is nothing but a crook.’

‘I think you’re right. The thieving little scrote!’

Bliss couldn’t think whether to laugh or scold his mother as he would have been scolded for using the very same word. Instead he just agreed with her. ‘He’s the worst kind of chiseller. Preying on the bereaved, the elderly, the vulnerable. Slithering around and oozing piousness while he tries to milk you all for your property, and no doubt anything you have in the bank, too.’

‘Promise me you won’t hurt him, Jimmy,’ his mother said. ‘I know you, you bugger. You’ll land him one and then it’ll be you who gets carted off by the Garda.’

‘I won’t hurt him, Mum. I might kill him, but I won’t hurt him when I do. And why shouldn’t I give him a bloody good hiding? It’s what he deserves.’

‘God will take care of his punishment, I’m sure.’

‘Oh, really? Won’t he want to turn the other cheek?’

His mother’s eyes gleamed as she said, ‘Oh, Jimmy. Have you never heard of fire and brimstone?’

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The emergency meeting of the congregation at the Ministry, called for by Jacqui Bliss, took place at seven-thirty that evening. It was well-attended. Bliss and Chandler were warmly welcomed by his mother’s friends, some of whom he’d met during previous visits. They came from far and wide, less than a handful living in Ballyfort itself. They were a pleasant bunch, and Bliss regretted what he was about to do.

Minister Finnegan was the last to arrive, by which time everyone was seated and waiting for him in the hall. He moved to the front and scoured the attendees. He extended

a hand, a smile thinning his lips. 'You want to come up here, Jacqui. I'm sure we're all eager to learn what it is you have to say. I know I am.'

The smile became obsequious, and Bliss felt himself despising the man all the more. He took a breath and got to his feet. 'My name is Jimmy Bliss,' he said. 'I'm Jacqui's son, and I'm here to speak for her, if I may.'

The Minister seemed flustered, fumbling with the knot of his tie. 'That's highly irregular, but I don't see why not.'

Bliss joined him at the front of the congregation, from whom a rumble of chatter boomed around the auditorium. 'Mr Finnegan,' Bliss said. 'The reason my mother called for this meeting lies in the concerns she has about you.'

'Me?' The smile was automatic, the puzzled frown that followed it anything but.

'Specifically, your relationship to Joe at the service station and the dealings he has going on there.'

The man's frown deepened. He licked his lips and clasped his hands together. 'Ah, now, there's a real dilemma. See, I can't really discuss that without dropping your man in it, too.'

'It's not just about what you're involved in there, Mr Finnegan. It's that you're involved at all. Supposedly that aspect of your past was firmly behind you.'

'And so it was. My human frailties, I'm afraid. I've asked the Lord for guidance, and he will show me the error of my ways.'

'I do hope so,' Bliss said. He thought about the possibilities and took a shot. 'I'm not sure your flock here will really understand a man who involves himself with hare coursing.'

The look on Finnegan's face surprised Bliss. If anything, the man looked relieved.

'You'll know of course that the practice is legal here in Ireland,' Finnegan said, recovering quickly.

'You mean to tell me you're taking your moral guidance based on a legal ruling, and not one that the rest of Europe finds sickening. Aren't hares God's creatures, too?'

The chatter spread around the room once more, crackling with energy. Those who had been unaware were suitably outraged. Those who'd had a good idea but had been too cowed to speak out, now took the opportunity to vent their feelings.

Finnegan coughed a couple of times into a clenched fist. The man was no doubt full of pride and covetous of the material things others had. But it was wrath that was written large in his eyes. He raised his hands to silence the ruckus, somehow finding enough piety to continue with his act.

‘People, my good people. I stand before you a penitent man, seeking your forgiveness. I admit I slipped, that my interest in this strictly legal pursuit is not something I can look back on with any degree of integrity. But, like all of us, I am human with human weaknesses, and I am praying to God to light my way out of the darkness.’

Bliss, who had been buying time, spotted movement in the foyer outside the hall. He was ready now for what he’d actually wanted to say.

‘I guess if we throw out a few “Amens” and beseech you to utter a few “Hail Marys” then your flock may learn to forgive you. But will they forgive the fleecing you intended to give them all, Finnegan?’

‘I... I don’t know what you mean, Mr Bliss. And, with respect, that’s *Minister* Finnegan.’

‘I think you do know exactly what I mean. And I won’t be referring to you as Minister. Because, I looked into you, *Finnegan*. And while I hadn’t realised that a Minister in the Catholic church doesn’t have to be ordained, isn’t required to be actual clergy, there is a specific requirement to have been commissioned to perform acts on behalf of the church. Tell me, Finnegan: who commissioned you, and to do what, precisely?’

‘That is a private matter, son. Strictly between myself and the Priest who tasked me to run this Ministry.’

‘Is that so? I wonder why he didn’t choose a Catholic, then?’

‘What in God’s name do you mean? What are you trying to say?’

Bliss ignored the theatrics. He took a slip of paper from his pocket and unfolded it to its full A4 size. ‘Not everybody will be able to see this,’ he said, ‘but I’m going to pass it around. It’s a photograph of you, Finnegan. And the photo sits alongside a newspaper article, which was written just days before you fled County Kilkenny with your tail between your legs having been exposed not only as a fake Minister, but a fake man of faith altogether. You’re no Catholic. In fact, you’re an atheist, Finnegan.’

The congregation as one shot up from their seats, rubber-tipped chair legs squealing on the waxed wooden floor. Voices were raised together with fists, but Bliss this time raised a hand to settle them.

‘I’m sorry about this, but there’s more,’ he said. ‘By now some of you will be having some horrible thoughts about home equity and a communal living paradise promised to you by this weasel. If you look behind you, you’ll see officers from the Garda. They are accompanied by detectives from the fraud squad. Mr Finnegan is familiar with them, and they’ve been waiting for him to pop up again. It seems that on this occasion he took his con further than he’s ever made it before. But rest assured, those of you who have signed anything over to this scumbag will get every penny back.’

As the gathering started talking at once, some shouting, others weeping, the Garda moved closer towards the front. Bliss made his final address. ‘I can only imagine what you’d like to do to him if you got your hands on him. But trust me when I tell you he will do time for this. As for any further punishment, my mother begged me not to punch the man, and I always keep my promises to my mum. My friend, on the other hand, made no such deal.’

With that, Chandler, who had quietly made her way around the back of them, stepped forward. She twisted Finnegan around, drew back her arm, and slammed her fist into his face right between the upper lip and nose, splitting both. The man buckled and reached for his face, blood already pouring from his wounds.

‘That’s for trying to cheat a lovely lady out of her savings,’ she said with a harsh snarl. She then slapped him hard across the cheek. ‘And that’s for being a dick!’

Bliss leaned over and kissed Chandler on the cheek. Then he turned, found his mother among the congregation, and winked. She raised her fist at him and shook it, but then laughed so hard she almost coughed herself into the next life.

\*

There was no triumph later that night, nor thoughts of a job well done. Concern for his mother’s state of mind kept Bliss relatively silent. He and Chandler provided all the

support they could, but they both understood her anxiety. Meanwhile, Bliss could not escape the notion that he'd missed something.

His mind went over the entire day, replaying it time after time. His focus began to unravel at precisely the same point whenever he reached it: Finnegan's look of relief.

Maybe it was because the man thought it would end there, that his con had not been discovered. But Bliss didn't believe that was the case. He kept seeing Finnegan's expression, and each time it told him that the man had been genuinely relieved to have his regular visits to Joe's garage associated with hare coursing. Which told Bliss one simple thing: something else was going on. Something much worse.

After a restless night, Bliss woke early and headed out to the service station on his own. It was just after 7.00am, and the station was empty and closed. Bliss peered inside. He estimated the space behind the door marked STORE and realised it was little more than a tiny cupboard, probably housing spares and assorted items sold at the counter. No room for quantities of booze or cigarettes or drugs.

He walked around the back of the building, but there were no additional storage units. There was nothing here. Barely any petrol, either, what with the one pump still having no fuel.

No fuel...

Bliss looked at the pump in question. The sign had been there the night he and Chandler had pulled over to get directions. It had been there when the pair of them had sat watching the place. It was still in place now. He checked both pumps more closely. The one he assumed was functioning distributed petrol from one side, diesel the other. The non-functioning pump was petrol only. All of the petrol was the same quality and price according to the signage.

His mind clicked back to the drive in on Friday evening. Before the encounter with the Range Rover, there had been a short run of heavy vehicles, including a fuel tanker. A Maxol petrol tanker. Along that entire stretch of road out to the coast there was only one Maxol service station, which was Joe's place. So if he'd had a delivery, why was the second pump dry?

Bliss walked across to the main tank filling caps on the far edge of the forecourt. Two of them were grimy, but with clear rub marks where rubber gloves had recently

twisted them off. The other two looked as if they had not been touched in years. He marched back over to the empty pump and glanced down at his feet.

Then he took out his phone and made a call.

\*

The Garda called at the cottage just as Bliss, his mother, and Chandler were about to sit down for an early dinner. Bliss spoke with them outside, not wanting his mother to hear the result of the search of the fuel tanks directly. The news was bound to upset her further, and he wanted the opportunity to filter it first.

‘Was it drugs?’ he asked.

The Garda officer gave a grim shake of the head. ‘Arms and explosives.’

‘You what? In a fuel tank?’

‘That tank hasn’t seen a drop of petrol in many a year. Cleaned, aired, lined and expanded. That store cupboard you mentioned gave us our way in. There’s a wee hatch in the floor with some steps leading down into a basement of sorts. From there we found a tunnel leading to the cache. Turns out, our Joe has links to the Provos. Modern-day sympathisers come and go, but the old guard retain a firm interest. Your man, the Minister, he helped with the funding. From what we understand, he was on the point of making a large purchase, and there was ample room underneath that pump.’

Bliss shook his head. ‘I was wrong again. I had Finnegan down as low level, and the garage dealing in drugs, though nothing major.’

‘Maybe so, but you were right when it counted most. You always have half a nagging suspicion about these sort of fellahs, but if they’re not on our terrorist watch list, then we can only keep an ear open for intelligence. We had Joe down for the hare coursing, too. That and dog fights. So go easy on yourself, Mr Bliss, because we’d never have put your man in this league.’

‘Even when you’re on holiday for the weekend,’ his mother chastised when he returned inside. ‘Can you not just sit back with your feet up and enjoy your rest, Jimmy?’

‘I don’t think he comes with an off switch, Jacqui,’ Chandler said, struggling not to laugh. ‘It’d be easier to work with a table lamp.’

Bliss's mother turned her head sharply, eyes no more than slits. 'Not that you're much better, Penny Chandler. I haven't forgotten that ear-boxing you gave Finnegan.'

'Neither has he,' Bliss said, chuckling now. 'The shithead deserved it, and the rest. Still, I think he's got more on his mind right now.'

'What do you mean?' Chandler asked. 'What's going on?'

Bliss sighed. 'Tell you what, let's sit back down at the table, and I'll tell you all about it over dinner.'

'Oh, Jimmy,' his mother moaned. 'What have you been up to now, son?'

'Not a lot, Mum. Not a lot. Nothing to concern yourself with. Now... you've heard of the IRA, yes..?'