

# **In the Shadow of the Judas Tree**

Norman Morrow.

*We must never forget.*

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**To my family.**

## Chapter 1

1982 Castlebridge, Co. Kildare.

Stage fright consumed twenty-five year old James Brennan as he trudged down the path toward the front gate. In his line of vision, two girls, a little younger than he, stood on the lane alongside the church, partially hidden behind a parked van. Spotting his approach, one of the girls nudged her friend as she passed her a lit cigarette. They eyed him and giggled.

James strode by them, staring resolutely at the cobbles, wishing he could burrow beneath the stone to escape female scrutiny. Hunching his shoulders, he hurried into the protective shadows of the church, toward the sanctuary offered by the Sacristy door. His natural desires trailed guilt in their wake. Like a drowning man, he could only go under so many times.

Their teasing laughter still ringing in his ears, James entered the Sacristy and slammed the door shut. He tensed at the unexpected sound of muffled footsteps and muted conversations coming from inside the church and would have taken flight but for the girls outside. On the floor, a pair of muddy football boots sat beneath a picture of the sacred heart of Jesus. They'd been left on top of a pair of shorts and a rumpled jersey.

Resisting the urge to reach beneath his robes to scratch an itch, James looked up into a pair of cool, white marble eyes. The statue of Our Blessed Lady, serenity itself, gazed down on him. Itch or no itch, James had a job to do. Taking a deep breath, he approached the door leading to the main church. With head bowed and sweaty hands clasped in an attitude of prayer, he entered and promptly stumbled on the steps, to the amusement of the spotty altar boys. He scowled at them. Luke Ahern reddened, but Sean Lavelle continued grinning. All three genuflected before the altar then turned and faced the congregation.

Afraid to make eye contact with the parishioners, James focused on the large oil painting of Padre Pio hung in the centre of the back wall. After a deep breath, he opened his mouth and enunciated the

ritualised words. As he spoke, everything else faded. All that remained was James, the saintly Padre in the distance ... and James' itch.

Memory directed his speech, but the itch soon became the centre of his universe. His eyes watered. Demented by the discomfort, his imagination ran amok. Padre Pio removed his outer garments, reached down his torso, and scratched. Blood gushed from the stigmata, and from his eyes, filling the canvas with a crimson river.

A child's laughter jerked James back to reality. He rubbed his eyes to regain focus. The child crawled on hands and knees, pushing a toy car up the aisle, his mass of blond curls bouncing as he moved. James expected the boy's parents would grab him at any moment and tried to ignore him. When he made it as far as the altar steps, James' expectations changed to prayers. *Ignore all such interruptions. Carry on regardless*, seasoned priests had advised. James tried. He really did. But when the little urchin ran the car up his shin, James' attempts to step backwards were blocked by the lectern.

'Vroom,' the boy said, grinning innocently up at him.

The wheels of the car rolled onwards, upward, above James' knee. He looked imploringly over the faces in the crowded church but saw only smirks from some of the congregation and disgust from others. Infants crawling around the aisle could be expected, but this lad was at least six. Unsure of what to do, he reached down and patted the curly head.

In response, the child's deep blue eyes danced with joy, and his arms wrapped around James' legs. When James was offered the little car, a chance to join in the fun, the bewildered priest glanced at the beams running the length of the church then settled his gaze on Padre Pio. The seminary hadn't prepared him for this. Nor had it ever suggested if he had visions of Padre Pio winking at him, he should wink back. Making a decision, James accepted the offered toy, dropped to his knees, and pushed the car along the carpet. 'Vroom vroom.'

The child laughed.

All heads turned toward the young woman approaching. Surrounded by the halo of light that streamed in from the window above the altar, barefoot, she appeared to float toward James. Long golden hair, falling over her shoulders, danced to the rise and fall of her breasts. Her hips swayed beneath a flimsy summer dress, her smile could light the gloomiest corner, but not the darkest heart it seemed for disdain and rebuke on many faces followed her path.

Still clutching the toy, James smiled at her, returned the car to the child and stood as she drew close. Bewitched by her heady scent, he gasped as she stood on her toes, reached up and feathered his cheek with a gentle kiss. So sensual was her touch, he struggled against the desire to meet her lips with his. A ripple of murmurs ran the length of

the church. Horrified, heads shook. Muffled titters from a few men, were rewarded with an elbow to their ribs from respective wives.

The vision knelt, whispered to her child and took him by the hand. Head held high, defiant to the cold-hearted stares, she led him down the aisle to their seats. In a daze, James' wide-open eyes followed the gentle curve of her buttocks, visible under her light dress.

A cough from a kind soul returned James to the present. Padre Pio offered no advice, no solace.

'Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me ... Those are the words of our Lord. Let us never forget them,' he said, gazing over the faces, watching disbelief fade and God's wisdom prevail.

As he prepared the Eucharist, her scent still clinging to him, he prayed she would not partake. James shuddered at the thought of her outstretched tongue. Within reach, yet beyond reach.

As usual, Agnes Murphy headed the queue for communion. Not for the first time, he ignored her pious stare, and looking over her head, his eyes met those of the child's mother. She winked and stood. Hand in hand with her child, they skipped down the aisle to the door. The church seemed darker after she'd left. Its cold stone walls closed in on him, on his thoughts, on his turmoil.

When Mass ended, he raced after the two altar boys as they made to escape, and cornered them in the Sacristy. Luke tried to hide behind Sean, an impossible feat as Sean barely reached Luke's shoulder.

'Luke, Sean, I'll forgive your tittering in God's house. Even a bishop could stumble. Do not do it again. Right?'

Luke nodded, 'Okay, sorry, Father.'

Sean stared at the floor, moving his weight from one scuffed shoe to the other, giving no indication he had heard a word.

'Be off home with you, Luke,' James said.

Luke glanced at Sean, removed his cassock and cotter, and scarpered.

'Sean, look at me.'

Sean broke into a grin as he lifted his head. About to lose his temper, James looked closer. The grin masked fear, a nervous reaction that could so easily be mistaken for cheekiness. When he took a step forward, the lad retreated to the corner and cowered, his arms raised and his fists clenched as though to defend himself.

'Relax, Sean. I'll not hurt you. I'll sit on that chair, and we'll talk.'

Sean returned his gaze to the floor.

'Do you play football?'

Sean nodded, ran a finger through his fair hair.

'What position?' James said.

Sean looked up, muttered and then spoke loud and clear. 'I'm a forward, the best on the team. I scored in every match this year.'

'Fair play to ya, Sean. I've got two left feet and couldn't kick snow off a rope. Is that your football gear on the floor?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Is there any need to bring it in here? It stinks up the room.'

'Father Sweeney told me to leave it there.'

'I see. I'll have a word with him.'

'Don't tell. Please, he will only get mad. Don't make things worse.'

'I'll tell ya what. In future, bring a bag for your kit and I'll not say anything to Father Sweeney. Now, off with you and don't be late for Mass tomorrow.'

Sean grabbed his football gear, raced to the door before turning. 'Thanks, Father.' In his rush to escape he dropped one of his boots.

The whole episode confused James. Why was Sean so afraid of Father Sweeney?

Today, aged twenty-five, he became a priest capable of saying Mass on his own. He should be celebrating this milestone. A single kiss had awoken desires he had striven to subdue. *May God forgive me. I'm not a priest, I'm a man.*



## Chapter 2

Sleep eluded James. He had to see the child's mother again, had to find out her name. He pictured her, as the first shafts of sunlight pierced the lace curtains, running carefree through a meadow of wild flowers. Sleep came. In his dreams, he held her hand.

† † †

James pulled the duvet cover over his head. Unable to ignore the alarm clock, he dragged himself from the bed, dressed, and made his way downstairs to the dining room.

Father Michael Sweeney sat at the table, teasing out the remaining clues of a crossword. Aged fifty-nine, thin strands of grey hair, combed over the centre of his head, could not hide the baldness. Sharper than a ferret, little escaped his attention. Eyebrows raised, he peered over the rim of his glasses when James entered; the curious look left the young priest wondering if he had spoken to anyone about his first Mass.

'Good morning, Mick,' James said.

'By the look of you, you haven't slept a wink.'

'It's like an oven in my bedroom.'

'Hot, are ya?'

What did he mean? James ignored the question and strolled to the kitchen. By the time, he returned with the coffees, Mick had lit his pipe and was reading the front page of the newspaper. James placed the mugs on the table, and waved away the pungent smoke, aware it was pointless to complain.

'Have mercy on their souls,' he said, showing James the headlines. "*Ten die in London IRA bombing.*"

James blessed himself. 'More innocent lives lost to the bombers. What cause is worth a single drop of blood?'

Mick banged the table with a vehemence that startled James. 'Show me one Englishman whose hands are not soaked with generations of Irish blood. You walk a free man on Irish soil, wearing

the vestments of a priest, unhindered. Not all Irishmen enjoy what you take for granted. Brits out!

‘But ... we are Christians. Forgiveness is the teaching of Christ, the rock on which he built our church. We cannot condone murder.’

‘Of course I can’t condone it, but I understand their motivations, support their cause. I pray for their souls and their success. My grandfather ... you’d not understand. I’ve said enough.’

‘Your grandfather?’

‘Tortured, humiliated and rumours he was an informer were spread by the Black and Tans. Those murdering bastards of the Crown signed his death warrant when their gossip reached the wrong ears. Just another Catholic life lost for the glory of their fuckin’ empire.’

James shook his head. How could this priest preach love and hate with the same breath, the same conviction? He had a more important paradox to consider, one he could not discuss with a living soul, except with the girl who had awoken feelings he had vowed to ignore.

‘Sorry about your grandfather. Best we leave politics outside the front door.’

Flicking back hair that had slipped over his forehead, Sweeney grunted an acknowledgement. He reached back, took an envelope from the mantelpiece and slid it across the table. ‘Another letter from your mother, posted three days ago.’

‘She’ll be wondering what I had for breakfast, and will request prayers for half of those in the cemetery near home,’ James said.

‘It’s likely she misses her only son.’

‘If she removed her nose from everyone else’s business, she might. Máire Brennan would control the tides if NASA sent her to the moon in their new Space Shuttle.’ James gulped back the strong coffee. Needing to escape, he decided to take a walk along the river. ‘Would you like a trout for supper tomorrow?’ he said.

Mick rubbed his hands together, licked his thin lips and laughed. ‘Ya found a good one?’

‘No! Not yet. I’ll take a walk and see can I spot one through the Polaroid glasses.’ James snatched the letter, stood and sidled toward the door.

‘By the way, I hear there was a commotion at Mass yesterday.’

James’ grip on the envelope tightened and then relaxed as he turned to answer. ‘I’d swear someone put the girl up to it, a test for this new priest. God knows, I felt like running for the door after she planted a kiss on my cheek. I’ve never seen her in the church before yesterday, and I bet she won’t come back after such disgraceful behaviour.’

‘Unusual as it may seem for this village, nobody knows much about the girl or her bastard child. Such behaviour from a whore is hardly surprising.’ Father Mick smirked.

James laughed. ‘That explains it.’ *God forgive me. She is not a whore.*

‘It does. Stay clear of the likes of her. Now, be off and find my supper.’

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James slipped into jeans and a tee-shirt and put on sunglasses. Remembering Sean’s football boot, he fetched it from the Sacristy and tied it to the handlebars of his bike. Since the shutters were closed in Lavelle’s pub, he continued past and cycled toward the river. After chaining his bicycle to a fencepost, he crossed a gate. Most walkers followed the track downstream from the bridge. Today, he preferred solitude, so he chose the more difficult trek upstream, negotiating heavy scrub, drains and ditches. Heffernan’s field was an oasis, a fertile meadow long ago reclaimed from the wildness by the riverside. A lone, ancient oak tree cast deep shadows beneath its canopy and onto the water.

Arms drawn behind his head, he sat with his back against the tree and contemplated life. ‘What am I thinking?’ he asked the wise old oak. ‘She has a child. What does it matter? I am a priest, a celibate servant of God. I cannot, must not yield to carnal, lustful thoughts.’ The affirmation of his vows settled his anxiety, and he drifted off to sleep.

A football struck his leg, wrenching him from slumber.

‘What the hell!’

‘Sssh,’ a muffled giggle came from behind the tree. Puzzled, he leapt up and edged around the trunk. Standing there, hands in the pockets of his short trousers, a lad, *her son*.

‘Boo,’ the child said.

‘Boo,’ said the sweetest voice James ever heard, and soft hands reached from behind and covered his eyes.

‘Guess who?’ she sang.

He felt her breath against his neck, a strange sensation, new, exciting and irresistible.

‘It’s the Virgin Mary, come to torture me. Have I neglected my duties?’

His hands found hers and lingered, flesh touching flesh for an intimate moment. When he turned, she reached up and removed his glasses. A daisy chain hung round her neck beneath tangled blonde

hair. A white Greenpeace tee-shirt accentuated her bronzed unblemished skin.

‘Cool, I’m a virgin again,’ she said, as she took his hand and dragged him towards her son. ‘This is my world, my son. Callum, say hello to Father Jamie.’

‘Play football with me, please.’ Callum ran to the ball and kicked it to James.

‘Okay, Callum. On one condition, you tell me your mam’s name.’

‘Summer,’ he said, ‘I’m Maradona and you’re Sócrates, Argentina against Brazil.’

James nodded. ‘Summer can be the referee.’

The World Cup Final was played in Heffernan’s field. Had Brazil a manager, he’d have screamed at Sócrates to keep his eyes on the bouncing ball, and off the referees’ breasts. Callum shouted the names of famous players as he outwitted James. At full time the score was 7-0 to Argentina, three from disputed penalties, and the Brazil team fell to the ground exhausted. Summer lay amongst the long grass beside James while Callum wandered to the river to skim stones.

‘That was so cool. Callum likes you, Jamie.’ she said. Plucking a blade of grass, she held it between the thumbs of her cupped hands and blew. James laughed loud at her attempts, plucked his own blade and joined the chorus of huffs, puffs and ear-piercing blasts.

‘By the way, my name is James’

For a moment, she seemed to ponder on this. ‘No. James is your priest name. With me, you are Jamie.’

‘Tell me about yourself, Summer. Where do you live? Have you other children? Are you married?’

Her eyes wandered down his body to his feet and back up again. ‘Do you like girls?’ she said. Before he could answer, she jumped up and shouted, ‘Callum, we must go. Say goodbye to Father Jamie.’

‘But ...,’ Callum said.

She drew a finger to her lips, ‘Sssh,’ turned, and taking Callum by the hand they walked back through the field.

Crestfallen, James stared after them. On reaching the top of the hill, she turned and shouted, ‘We live in the cottage over here. Call tomorrow afternoon and bring beer.’

Her personality matched her name. Summer, over and over, he whispered, returning to the bridge. James sprinted alongside the bicycle, letting it freewheel downhill, and then vaulted onto the saddle. He rode like the wind, the potholes holding no fear for him.

On his way back up the main street, he noticed his two tormentors outside Lavelle’s pub. One turned her back, wiggled her bum beneath her revealing skirt. Her friend shouted as he passed. ‘Did ya get an eyeful, Father Sexy?’

Father Sexy spun the wheel of his bike and stopped inches from the startled girls. 'Ladies, I have an hour to spare. What have ye in mind?' Their bravery withered before his eyes.

The brunette blushed. 'Only messing, Father.'

'I'll expect ye at confessions this evening, otherwise I'll have a talk with your parents.'

Stomping on the cigarette butt, one of the girls had dropped, he laughed as they raced away. He untied the boot from the bike and strode in the front door of Lavelle's.

Seanie Lavelle leaned on the counter, counting loose change, making little neat stacks of coins. Reckoned to be a tough man by many, he ran a good clean pub and had a reputation for being fair as long as you didn't upset him. Apart from seeing him occasionally at Mass or sweeping the path outside the pub, they had not spoken.

One stack of pennies towered over the others. Seanie grunted, plucked four coins from the top of it, and tossing them into the till, bagged the rest.

'Mr. Ryan was a shite maths teacher, and I was a poor student. So you must be the new young priest, Father Brennan.'

'Father James Brennan. I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Lavelle.' He offered his hand.

'Mr. Lavelle was my father. When we carried his coffin outside, the old tradition of formality went with him. Anytime you darken my door, leave your uniform out on the street. I'm Seanie. James, what can I get you?'

'Your son left this in the Sacristy,' James said, tossing the football boot onto the counter.

'For feck's sake.' Seanie seized the boot, a cloth, and wiped away the muck. Leaning over the side, he roared, 'Sean Lavelle, get your arse downstairs, there's a priest here to see you.'

Upstairs, a door banged.

'Will you have a drink? As it's your first visit to the finest pub in Castlebridge, it's on the house.'

James sat on a stool. 'I'll have a Coke with ice if you have any.'

Seanie faced the till and sank to his knees. 'Another bloody teetotaller sent to deny me a living. Look at the till. When it opens it brings music to my ears. When it remains closed, my heart bleeds. Did they not teach you how to drink in Maynooth?'

'I took the pledge when I was sixteen, and my mother would have killed me if I broke it.'

'So did I,' Seanie said, rising to his feet. 'My father filled me with porter, and my mother didn't talk to him for a fortnight.' After scooping ice from the bucket, he dropped several cubes into a glass, poured in a Coke and placed the glass on the counter. 'That will be forty pence.'

‘I’ve... I’ve no money. You said it was on the house.’

‘I did. I said you could have a drink on the house and the offer still stands. That rubbish is forty pence. I’ll throw in the ice for free.’ Seanie folded his arms.

James nudged the glass back across the counter and hopped off the barstool. The door offered an easy escape from this standoff. He took a step, stopped, turned and climbed back on the barstool. Staring over the rim of the glass at Seanie, he sank half the coke and burped. ‘Since you begrudge the twenty pence you drop in the basket on the rare occasion you go to Mass, consider the next two Masses on the house,’ James said, as he crossed his arms.

‘Has Sweeney been bad-mouthing me?’

‘No. Call it intuition.’

Seanie grunted, spat on the palm of his hand and stuck it across the counter. ‘Mother of Jesus, at last Castlebridge has a real priest. James Brennan, you and me will be good friends. Now where the feck is Sean? Back in a minute.’

James laughed as he listened to Seanie’s roaring. ‘Come here. If I have to go up ...’ Silence. ‘Sean, Father Brennan is here to see you.’

The sound of a door opening, Sean bounded down the stairs and into the lounge.

‘You forgot one of your boots. I gave it to your father,’ James said.

Sean wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jumper, and caught the boot which Seanie tossed to him. ‘Thanks, Father Brennan. Will you be saying Mass in the morning?’

‘I will,’ James said.

Sean walked to the door separating the living quarters from the bar. He looked back over his shoulder. ‘Good.’

Seanie beamed, clearly proud of his young lad, ‘He’s saving up every penny he gets from doing altar boy at weddings. I’ve got a new fly-fishing rod and waders ordered for him, and as soon as he earns them, they will be his.’

James checked his watch. ‘Seanie, I’ve got to go. I expect to see you at Mass to collect what I owe you.’

‘Don’t bet on it,’ shouted Seanie as James left.

## Chapter 3

Morning Mass passing without hiccup, James raced back to the house to divest himself of priestly garb.

Black, the colour of his shoes and most of his clothes; not at all suitable for what he hoped would be his first date with Summer. He pulled on yesterday's jeans and tee-shirt, lifted a can of deodorant and sprayed himself from head to toe. Rubbing his eyes, he emerged from the chemical shower, opened the wardrobe door and reached down for his "Jesus Sandals." *Black*. Resigned to having no other option, he collapsed onto the bed and cursed Lady Luck. She heard his pleas and guided his gaze to his suitcase on top of the wardrobe. *Cotton-eyed Joe. I'd er been married long ergo.*

He'd forgotten he owned a pair of cowboy boots, worn only once to a charity barn dance. Eager hands dragged the case off the wardrobe, tore it open and pulled out the *brown* boots. Made from distressed leather, with a golden buffalo etched on each curled up toe, he ran his finger over the silver ring holding the removable harness. He slipped on the boots and stuffed the bottom of his jeans down inside them.

*Where do I get beer?*

Father Sweeney had a few bottles in a press in the dining room, but removing a few would be too risky. The saloon seemed an obvious answer. Left with no other choice, he galloped outside, hopped onto the saddle of his bicycle, and made for the only familiar watering hole in town.

God knows why he expected the pub would be empty. Three men sitting at the counter turned and looked him up and down as he closed the door.

*They look mean.*

The oldest, a bleary-eyed codger with an enormous beer belly and matching chins, laughed. 'Lads, it's the Marshall.'

Their raucous response enticed Seanie from the backroom. 'Did I miss something funny from the brothers Kelly?'

'We were welcoming this cowboy to Castlebridge. He's looking for whiskey, a bale of hay for his horse and a girl for the night,' one of the brothers said.

Seanie grinned. 'In that case I can oblige with the whiskey. Seeing as the whole parish knows your wives are still virgins, I'd say they would jump at the chance of a roll in the hay with him.'

Fists flew across the counter, but met their match in Seanie. 'Settle down, lads. We don't want to upset the new priest. Come around the back, Father. This front bar is for the loungers and layabouts, the back for men of intellect and good manners.'

Hunched over the counter, the Kelly brothers drowned their embarrassment with porter.

'Confessions are after Mass this evening. Be there!' James ordered as he strode past them.

Seanie fiddled with the knob on a small television and twisted the coat hanger in every direction without success. 'Blast. I'll miss the racing. Do you ever have a flutter?'

'Flutter?'

Seanie gave up on the television, and returned behind the counter. 'God, you are greener than the grass on the football pitch. A flutter is a bet, a few quid on the nags.'

'Gambling is a sinful waste,' James countered.

Seanie grunted. 'It might be in the rest of the country, might be in whatever bog hole you crawled out from, but here in County Kildare it's a way of life. I'm not one to tell tales or partake in idle gossip, but I could name a dozen priests who couldn't pass a horse without placing a bet on it.'

'You're having me on.'

'You don't drink, smoke or gamble. Apart from praying and telling everyone else they are sinners, what do you do for fun?'

James thought about this for a moment. 'Fly fishing and tying flies. What do you do apart from gambling?' James said.

'Does Your Holiness mean, what do I do when I'm not taking the mickey out of young priests and running this pub?' James proffered a nod and the barman continued. 'I catch fine brown trout with professionally tied flies I purchased in a shop.'

Eager to prove to Seanie there was more to James Brennan than a collar, he seized this opening. 'I'll do a deal with you. I'm in need of two bottles of beer for a friend, and you certainly are in need of decent flies. Are you willing to trade for the finest flies your beady eyes ever saw?'

'How do I know they're any good?'

'How do I know you don't water down your beer?'

'Two dozen flies. Deal?'

'Deal!' Sealing the agreement, James wiped the spittle from his hand.



Seanie fetched two bottles of beer, two Guinness and two lagers, and placed them in front of James. 'Well, Mr. Teetotaller, which of these does your friend drink?'

'Beer is beer, isn't it?' James hadn't a clue, no more a clue than Seanie had of saying Mass.

'Is it for a he or a she?'

Ouch! The very question James feared most had been asked. Adding to the list of lies he told this week, he stammered. 'He, it's for a he.'

'I thought it would be.' Seanie smirked and leaned across the counter. 'Take the beer and if *he* prefers lager, tell *him* I said it's a girlie drink. Tell *him* to bring the two bottles back in here and I'll swap them for lager. Also, tell *him* I said, I will give *her* a drink on the house for *her* trouble.'

Knowing he'd be damned if he answered and damned if he didn't, James kept his mouth shut.

'Okay, let me make this easy for you,' Sean said, removing the two bottles of Guinness. 'Lager or Beer, which would she prefer?'

'Lager,' muttered James, unable to look at Seanie.

Seanie reached across the counter and patted James on the head. 'Look at me.'

James settled his eyes on Sean's shoulder.

'My young friend, do you think your God would lock a stallion in a stable on his own? Your dirty little secret is safe with me and will never be mentioned again. I suppose you want a bag as well?'

'We are only friends. A bag would be great.' James tried to smile.

'One thing before you leave,' Seanie said, wiping down the counter.

'What?'

'It's a bit premature to have the zip on your jeans open.'

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Leaving the village behind, exhilarated by freedom and buoyed by his infatuation, James pedalled so fast the beer bottles risked being smashed against the bike. Pulling off the main road, he continued up a bumpy, pothole-riddled boren. Occasionally, he stood on the pedals and peered over the bushes, trying to see the river and judge his position. He realised he needn't have bothered as there was no mistaking Heffernan's meadow. Its lush grass reached a gate along the roadside, and a little further, an ivy-clad cottage stood behind a jungle of unkempt greenery.

Pausing at the gate, he ran licked fingers through his tight-cropped fair hair, flattening any miscreants and calming his nerves. One cowboy boot following the other, he pushed the bike the last few yards onto the narrow path to the cottage. Callum's toy car, parked upside

down at the side door, confirmed he had found the right place. *Are you sure about this? No. Yes. I don't know.*

Too late to change his mind, the door opened and Callum raced out to meet him.

'Father Jamie, Father Jamie,' he squealed.

James righted the car and pushed it along. 'Vroom. Hi, Callum.'

'Summer, Mam, Father Jamie's here.' Little hands nabbed James and dragged him inside the neglected cottage.

Summer looked so different in dungarees, more modern than the hippy who danced in the meadow in his dreams. Standing beside the single window, in front of an easel, her coy smile put him at ease.

'Jamie, you came. Cool, our first visitor. I'm putting the finishing touches to this. Grab a seat and don't peep.'

James sat on the rattan backed chair beside the open fireplace. Crunched up paper, crisp packets and other rubbish spilled over the hearth onto the threadbare rug and stone floor. Light flickered from two lavender scented candles on the wooden shelf above, casting eerie shadows. Numerous watercolours and sketches placed haphazardly on the walls, covered most of the faded wallpaper beneath. Many were of Callum, some of Heffernan's meadow and the river, others of people he did not recognise.

A single mug with the handle of a teaspoon peeping from the rim, sat on a short countertop alongside a rusty gas cooker. Above the sink, a cupboard whose door seemed to hang on a single hinge had yellowed from age and neglect. *Exactly what my place would look like if I had a choice.* So sickened by the sterile seminary and the priest's house – he yearned for the freedom offered by such a home. Callum sat at his mother's feet, glancing from the painting to James, and at times grinned. Engrossed in her work, Summer's gaze flicked between the easel and James. After an age, she stepped back, Callum nodded, and both of them smiled.

'Father Jamie, close your eyes,' Summer said.

Not knowing what to expect, he did as bid. Callum clambered over the back of his chair. His small hands, smelling of crisps, reached forward and covered James' eyes. Hearing only Callum's excited breathing and something being dragged along the floor, his excitement grew.

'Jamie, you can look now,' whispered Summer.'

Callum's hands falling away from James' face, he opened his eyes. Every detail captured as though he gazed into a mirror, his deep blue eyes, square chin and crooked teeth, all painted from memory. Twice they had met, yet she had brought to life a painting that accentuated not just his image, but also his character. The slant of his shoulders beneath a white tee-shirt, a certain boyish innocence and the way he clasped his hands when nervous. She'd written an inscription on the

bottom corner. "Father Jamie. Summer & Callum 1982". Overcome by emotion, he stared at his boots.

Summer held a hand under his chin and gently raised his head. 'Sssh, hang it somewhere in your house. I think he likes it, Callum. Cool.' She sat cross-legged on the rug in front of James. Callum lay down beside her and placed his head on her lap. She stroked his hair.

'Summer, the painting is so beautiful. I'll treasure it forever, though I don't know where I can hang it. Between the Popes on my dining room wall would be a good place, but I expect Father Sweeney would choke if he had to look at two of me when eating his dinner. Thanks. Oh, I forgot, I brought some beer for you.

Callum raced to the corner, returned with a bottle opener and handed it to James. Summer took the offered bottle and brought it to her lips, sipped a little and finding a gap between the rubbish in the hearth, sat the bottle there.

'Callum, it's time for your nap. Father Jamie will be gone when you wake.'

'Agh, Mam.'

'Son, please say goodbye. Show Father Jamie how brave you are.'

The boy kissed his mother and then wrapped his little arms around James. 'Goodbye, Father Jamie. Will you play football tomorrow?'

Staring at Summer, he answered. 'I can't tomorrow, but if your mother wishes it, I can come the following day.'

Callum insisted they shake hands before he disappeared into another room, leaving them alone. Summer sipped her beer, then took a rolled cigarette from behind her ear and lit it. After inhaling deeply, she offered it to James. Unlike most cigarette smoke, he found the sweetness of it enticing. Wanting to take it to please her, yet knowing he must surely splutter like the exhaust of an old car if he did, he shook his head.

'I don't smoke.'

'I don't either,' she said, giggling as she inhaled again. 'I've never talked to a priest before, never knew they could be young, handsome ... and kind. Can we be friends?'

Not knowing quite what she meant, he nodded, before blurting out the one question that had preyed on his mind. 'Where is Callum's father?'

'Don't know where he is, or even know his name. I sketched a picture of him after we made love in a tent at a music festival. Months later, I tore it up. It's strange I call it making love and weird to be telling a priest. I haven't been with another man since. It gets lonely here, only Callum and me living in this place. We moved in three months ago. You are the second person to show us any kindness.' She tossed the cigarette into the fireplace and finished her beer.

*No father, no boyfriend. So easily could I slide down onto the floor beside her, to feel the warmth of her body against mine.* Fearful of succumbing to desire, he stood.

‘I’m only here two months and have been lonely for many years. Let’s be friends, the best of friends; you, me and Callum. God knows what people will say or think. I best be off. If it’s okay, I will call again in two days and play some more football.’

‘Callum would like that. Must you leave so soon?’

*God, I’d stay forever if I could.* ‘Yes. Duty does not allow me much freedom.’

Summer walked him to the door. He’d forgotten to take the portrait. She fetched it and handed it to him. ‘Close your eyes,’ she said.

Her hands slid around his waist, her breasts brushing his chest. He gasped as her lips touched his. Involuntarily he shook. Excited tremors, feelings only previously dreamt of, shook him. As though he had done it a thousand times before, he brought a hand to the back of her head and ruffled her silky hair. Giggling, she slid down and away from him.

‘Close friends, that’s so cool,’ she said, opening the door and, winked as she shut the door.

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