

Opening extract from
The Operation

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Chapter 1

In the early hours of Saturday October the 11th, 2003, part of a living human being was found outside the Accident and Emergency Department of St Aiden's Hospital, Dublin. The head and the torso, no arms, no legs. There was a delay bringing him in because the porter who made the discovery fainted.

Grogarty, the surgeon on call, and McBride, the Casualty Officer, had been on duty since nine the previous morning and had worked through the routine Friday night cases, the sequelae of pub brawls, road accidents, domestic violence. They were drinking coffee, laced, for McBride, with whisky, before retiring to the doctors' mess for some sleep.

"You can't talk about evil as if it was an absolute entity, divorced from people and circumstances," said McBride, staring out into the dark.

It was a familiar topic, ever since Grogarty had married and McBride lost his religion.

Grogarty yawned. "Why not? You'll never explain all behaviour by genes and developmental psychology."

"Only because our present level of knowledge is still so rudimentary." McBride was set on a career in psychiatry.

"There'll always be some people who can't be explained away."

"Such as?"

"The usual suspects."

"They're all dead. That's my point. We might understand if we knew more about them."

"What about that drug baron we were reading about? Raiding villages for young girls and has them raped and tortured. Kills

anyone who gets in his way. And he must be responsible for thousands of kids getting hooked on drugs.”

“Where do you draw the line? Are all his men evil? Is anyone who pushes drugs evil? Are all sexual deviants evil?”

“What I’m saying is that in his case it’s so clear that you don’t have to talk about drawing lines. You can’t explain a man like that unless you invoke the concept of evil. And if you have to do it for him, then the concept of evil exists.”

“I’d say there’s a flaw in your logic but I’m not up to it just now.”

At this point the trolley was wheeled in. McBride, Grogarty and three nurses, one a nun, watched in silence as the cover was removed to reveal what was left of the person, essentially just the head and trunk. All four limbs had been amputated close to the body. The lips and external ears were missing and the eye-balls absent from their sockets. The external genitalia had been removed. There was no hair on the head or trunk. They got down to the routine business of examining the patient. A central venous line was inserted in order to evaluate cardiovascular status and carry out routine blood tests. Further exploration revealed that the vocal cords had been dissected out and that most of the apparatus within the middle-ear extirpated, leaving the man deaf. What remained of the body, however, proved to be in sound physiological condition, with good healing at all the operative sites.

It was a long night. There were telephone calls to senior surgeons and physicians and hospital managers. There was difficulty in finding a bed, because it did not strictly present a surgical or medical problem. There was a small pressure sore on the back and eventually McBride, chief of surgery and medical director, father of McBride the casualty officer, decided that the torso would go to the geriatric ward. And there it remained for some time.

A week later, also in the early hours of a Saturday morning, Yacht Hannah was in the English Channel, fifty degrees and thirty-five minutes north, four minutes east, just outside the shipping lane with

its procession of mast-head lights. She was on a beam reach, making a steady six knots, the wind force four from the West. Inspector Joseph O'Brien was at the tiller, on a bearing for Fecamp. Below, sleeping, were Hayward, co-owner of the eight metre sloop, and Hayward's wife Sue.

"Traffic." The VHF crackled below.

O'Brien liked the night watch, alone at sea with a clear sky and the stars, a good time to think. He wanted to sail the Atlantic and enter Boston Harbour, not the best course with the prevailing winds and tide. But with a good yacht it was feasible. If he took early retirement his lump sum would pay off the mortgage or help towards a bigger boat, not both. And there was his son.

He set the autopilot for one-six-five and wedged himself into the corner of the cockpit, trying to light his pipe. The sea was livening up, some white horses, but well-formed waves and a good motion of the hull. He was rarely sea-sick at the end of the season. And then he was called up on the VHF radio, the coastguard. Chief Superintendent Best waiting to speak to him.

"Where are you, Joe?"

"The channel. Heading for France."

"I'm sorry, Joe, but you need to turn round. Or is it heave to?"

"Go about. If you really have to."

"The Dublin body. You heard about it? The one with no arms and legs."

"Yes."

"They traced him through a DNA match. Turns out to be an Englishman. Harry Tate. Released from Barton High Security Prison four months ago."

O'Brien groaned. He had investigated a case at Barton six months earlier. This was coming his way.

"I need you. All this bloody sick leave. Monday morning in my office."

"Look, there are two other people on this boat. Best?"

A container ship was close on the starboard bow. O'Brien

disengaged the autopilot and pushed the tiller over, coming closer to the wind. Then he tacked round and changed course to three-five-five degrees, set for Chichester on the port tack.

Detective Sergeant Debbie Masters stood at the foot of the bed with the senior McBride. The strong smell of pine. A nursing sister, a nun, was adjusting the flow of glucose and saline in the intravenous drip.

“It must be the work of a mad man,” said Masters.

“It’s the work of someone with considerable surgical expertise,” observed McBride, almost with relish. “Interesting, you know, but the EEG is normal. Electroencephalogram. There’s no brain damage. Maybe a slight abnormality in the parietal lobes, but within normal limits. He’s thinking, fully conscious. If you can call it that, without sight or sound, no smell, no taste.” He stared down at the body. “All that expertise, all that skill, to produce this ... this monstrosity.”

“Do you know when it was done?”

“The pathologists have been buzzing around like flies,” muttered McBride, stooping to read the dial on one of the monitors. “Very interested in the case, ghoulish lot. They’re putting it within the past couple of months. Incidentally, it looks like he snipped the seventh cranial, the facial nerve.” McBride and then straightened his back and turned to Masters. “No lip-reading, no moving his eyebrows, what’s left of them. Whoever did this took a lot of trouble to stop him communicating with the rest of us. We’ve a psychologist on the job. One of the nuns. You’d think that would be a contradiction in terms. They’ve had him on the EEG and made loud noises, nothing. There is some response from touch.”

“What about tracing letters? Or morse code or something?” asked Masters.

McBride rubbed the side of his neck, frowning. “They’re doing everything they know. They tried to get him moving his belly muscles, one contraction for yes, two for no, create an alphabet, all that. But it’s no good. That’s where the neurosurgery comes in. The clever devil ablated part of the spinal cord, some kind of coagulation

technique. Rudimentary, but effective. He must have thought how they'd try to communicate and he's gone for proprioception, that's the touch pathways. He even got the ninth nerve, so his taste has gone. They're doing some fancy scans to see if anything is spared."

"Why?" said Masters. "Why this? Why not just kill him?"

"Maybe he had scruples about murder?"

"And do this?"

"There's a difference, in the scale of things."

"I understand he's a criminal, just released from prison. There is one curious thing. We found the word Gloria tattooed inside what's left of his lower lip. And it's recent."

"How recent?"

"It was probably done during the operations. It's an unusual tattoo, slightly raised."

"Gloria? Isn't that Latin? Some kind of Catholic thing?"

McBride nodded. "Gloria in Excelsis Deo. Glory be to God on High."

"That would be sick."

"More likely to be a name, don't you think?"

"It's not a common name." She shook her head. "What are you going to do with him?"

"It? I've been onto the ministry but there's no guidance."

"The church?"

"The health ministry. Where is he going to go? They won't tell me. There's no precedent. For now we're keeping him here on the geriatric ward, but the geriatricians are furious with me. He's not much more than forty, after all. But he's no longer surgical so we're not taking him into a surgical bed. And we certainly can't take up an intensive care bed, not unless he gets terminal."

Masters glanced over at the nun. "There's no question of ... "

"The man is conscious, fully conscious, he has a life," replied McBride quickly, speaking louder than necessary. "There's no question of any intervention that would put him at risk."

"It's an interesting dilemma."

“I think it’s going to be an expensive dilemma. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t live for another thirty years.”

“Thirty years! In that state? Just lying there. Just ... thinking.”

McBride turned away.

Masters stared at the neatly repaired sockets where the eyes had been. “Let’s just hope he has some good memories.”

O’Brien’s chair was under the lee of a big, shiny desk in Clive Best’s big office, a generous space even for a Chief Superintendent, plenty of light and white walls and a few discrete prints. The desk was clear except for a silver-framed photograph of Best’s family, pretty wife, three attractive children and two labradors. And a big Italian coffee cup, white porcelain.

Best leaned back in his leather chair, not the standard issue, his long legs stretched out. “Tate’s DNA was on record because of that Barton case, the lad who was raped and killed.”

“Nick Holland,” said O’Brien.

“Tate was out on parole when Holland was murdered, but they took samples from the whole wing. And kept them, which is probably illegal. Harry Tate’s matched up to our friend in Dublin. Forty-five, married, country home in Essex, one of those East End families moving out to the leafy suburbs and going semi-legit. Six years for armed robbery, kept his nose clean, got parole, released four months ago. A month later he disappears, vanished off the face of the earth.” Best sipped his cappuccino. “Then he turns up in Dublin. Like that.”

O’Brien blew across the polystyrene cup from the machine in the corridor. “Gang-land stuff, not my line.”

“Nick Holland was tied up, raped, burnt with cigarettes. Seems pretty sick to me.”

O’Brien sighed. “I told them at the time it was a professional hit, made to look like a sex crime.”

“And now Harry Tate carved up. This is bizarre stuff, Joe, very nasty, there’s got to be a sex angle. You’re the right man for it. And

both in Barton. One other thing, Joe. Tate has the word Gloria tattooed inside his mouth. Done at the same time that he was cut up.”

“Who’s Gloria?”

“Who or what. Could be some religious thing.”

O’Brien frowned. “It’s going to be high-profile, the press will be all over it.”

“I know how much you like the media, Joe.” Best grinned, clapping his head without ruffling the sleek, thick hair. He was solid, heavy-built, his handsome face shiny and smooth and filled out, sparing him the wrinkles that were his due. “We’ll keep them off your back. I really need you. Half the squad are off studying or sick or whatever. But I’ve got a nice sweetener for you. Debbie Masters. Quite a girl. Real promise, but not had a chance to show it yet. I hoped she’d get a chance to work with you before you jack it in.”

“Why?”

Best chuckled. “Come on, Joe, don’t sell yourself short.”

O’Brien had heard something about her. He tried to recall what.

“She was on that celebrity rape case a year ago,” said Best. “Then I sent her over to the States. She’s just back from one of their fancy units. Up with all the latest technology, all the bio-stuff and computers. Computer simulation, the works.”

“So where is she now?”

“In Dublin seeing Harry Tate. She’s back tomorrow. I suggest you meet her at Stansted on your way to Barton Nick. You can see your old friend Martin Cotton again. You still think he was behind the Holland murder?”

O’Brien nodded.

“Even with his alibi?”

“You can fix most things inside, you should know that. From his previous nick he arranged to have an old girl-friend murdered.”

Best sighed. “That was never proved, Joe. That said, there’s been no progress with the case. I phoned the officer in charge. Still no relatives come forward.”

“Not unusual with a lad like Holland. He was in care from the age

of six, ran away from his foster parents when he was fourteen, then no record of him until he turned up in the criminal justice system.”

Best stood and walked over to the window. A bright Autumn morning, icy blue sky. Down below the streets were choked with traffic. “Nice view, isn’t it? The older I get the more I value the creature comforts. That’s why I live out of town. We were lucky, got in just before the last boom. Half an acre, not bad for Surrey. And no comparison with the schools. By the way, I’m celebrating. My eldest lad just got a place at Cambridge. Wife’s delighted. He gets the brains from her, of course. Hardly did a stroke of work, the bugger.”

Best lifted his hand, as if to place it on O’Brien’s shoulder, but pulled back, letting his arm drop. He studied his face. They were the same age and had started out together, twenty-five years ago, but he reckoned he looked ten years younger than O’Brien.

“How’s your lad doing, Joe?”

O’Brien nodded.

“You alright, Joe?”

“I’m terrific.”

“You still live in Islington?”

“Holloway.”

“I’ve a little place round the corner, comes in handy when I work late.” His mouth carried the hint of a smirk, and he looked like he wanted to say more.

“It’s not my kind of case,” said O’Brien.

“I know you don’t like big teams, Joe, but Bowyer can handle the technical boys, forensics, computers, NCIS, press, all that. You’ve worked with him before.” He glanced at his expensive watch. “I’ve a meeting at ten. Give me a buzz tomorrow once you’re up there. And give my regards to Debbie. Might do you some good working with her, Joe. We all get stale.”

Chapter 2

The 737 landed at Stansted at eight in the morning, with O'Brien waiting in the terminal building, a dusty light filtering through the expanse of glass and steel. He still didn't recollect what he had heard about Debbie Masters, but he hoped she wasn't pretty. He was on his own and had settled into a kind of equilibrium which he didn't want disturbed. But here she was, with the emerging passengers, and she was.

"Inspector O'Brien?"

He nodded.

Her hand was moist and she had a big, open smile, one tooth slightly crooked. A hint of sweat and lavender. Wide face with full lips, clear skin, dusky, almost brown, two prominent moles. Glossy black hair. Medium height and build, bordering on the plump, with generous breasts.

O'Brien reached for his pipe.

"I'm really glad to have this chance of working with you," she said, "I've heard a lot about you."

O'Brien nodded and placed the unlit pipe in his mouth.

"Chief Superintendent Best said it would be a good opportunity for me. You know him quite well?"

"You must have upset him."

She blushed. "Why do you say that?"

"Because we're on a hiding to nothing with this case. How about some coffee?"

"I'm hungry." She smiled awkwardly. "He said that if anyone can sort it you can."

They joined the queue at a cafe got up in Victorian kitsch, gilt mirrors, ornate tables, fake wood paneling.

“Good flight?”

She grinned. “There are no good flights as far as I’m concerned. There was this boy at school, wildest kid in class, who became a pilot. Whenever I’m on a plane I just sit there thinking about Dean.” She spoke fast, South London accent with a hint of American.

She reached for a plateful of sausage, bacon, beans, eggs, tomatoes, all sliding around in a pool of grease. She also took a pastry covered with pink icing and ordered a cappuccino. O’Brien had milky coffee. He was fifty, she guessed, in a crumpled blue suit with a white shirt. Pale blue eyes, almost without colour, and without expression. A deep tan across his lined face.

“Been away on holiday?” she asked brightly.

“Sailing.”

“I had a boyfriend who was always trying to get me out on his boat, but I kept being sea sick.” She set about her breakfast eagerly, with a couple of bold sweeps of the knife and fork. “So how do you get to be an expert on sex crimes? Have you got a psychology degree or something?”

“No psychology,” muttered O’Brien. “Nobody was interested when I was starting out. Armed robbery and gangs, that’s where you made your name. I got a case, a girl round the back of Paddington station, then another, then I seemed to develop a knack for it.”

“Is that why you were on the Barton case?”

“I wasn’t on the Barton case. The local boys asked me in for a second opinion and I went up a couple of times. A lad called Nick Holland was killed last Christmas Day. They thought it was a sex crime.”

“Clive says you had a suspect, somebody you put away.”

“Martin Cotton. He was at the Christmas Day service when it happened.”

“Why are you so sure he was behind it?”

O’Brien chewed his lower lip. “You get a feel. Sometimes misleading, sometimes not. I didn’t like the way he looked at me when I was questioning him. He was enjoying it.”

“One of those creeps who like playing with you. Is he dangerous?”

“More dangerous in Barton than he was on the outside. Nothing to lose.” He sipped his coffee. “What have they found in Dublin?”

“They’ve got a psychologist trying to make contact, but no success so far. Apparently his spinal cord has been cut which means he can’t move or feel things. And there’s one very strange thing – the word Gloria tattooed on the inside of his lower lip. They think it could be a name or something religious. With a capital G. It’s a raised tattoo, lots of little bumps. Clive is keeping that back from the press.”

“Good. How did Tate get to the hospital?”

“Somebody saw a Range Rover with English plates, near the hospital. It was driving around in a suspicious way, stopping and starting, then going down Berkeley Road and appearing again just outside the hospital.”

“No numbers?”

Masters shook her head. “Friday night. But it was new. And darkish. Maybe shiny.”

“Maybe shiny.”

“Yes, maybe shiny. Definitely darkish. Probably new. Definitely a Range Rover. Definitely English plates. The witness was a fierce Republican.”

“And drunk?”

“Apparently at the time he saw it he was only half drunk.”

O’Brien looked at his watch. “Time we were moving.”

“We’re going to see the widow?” She shook her head. “Wife, I should say. I keep thinking of it as a corpse. Do you think it has anything to do with the lad who was killed in Barton?”

“Clive Best thinks so.”

“What about him? The lad who was killed?”

“Nick Holland. He was nineteen, unstable. And dim, could hardly read or write. He should never have been in Barton. He was easy meat for the lifers.”

“You think some pervert killed him for fun?”

O'Brien shook his head. "I told them at the time it wasn't a sex crime."

"Clive said he was raped and tortured, hands tied behind his back."

"He was burned with cigarettes. But it was a professional job made to look like a sexual thing."

"How could you tell?"

"The way the body lies, the ligature marks. There'd been anal intercourse, but some time before he was killed, and the DNA matched Cotton. But they screened everybody. Lucky for us," he added grimly, "or they wouldn't have the DNA match on Tate."

"He's gay, this Cotton?"

"When he's inside. The likes of Cotton turn predator when they're in for a long stretch, go after vulnerable kids." He stood up.

Masters reached for the pastry. "Can't resist. You're not having any yourself?"

O'Brien shook his head.

"Had your breakfast already? Must be a married man."

A soft ring tone and O'Brien reached inside his jacket for his mobile phone, an old model. He listened for a while, shaking his head. "You don't need to do that," he said, turning his back on Masters, "he'll be there by ten." A pause, listening again. "Then go to bed. I'm at Stansted, I'll be back this evening." He listened again, then spoke louder. "It's on the table. Phone him now. After nine then, alright?" He moved further away. "As soon as I can ... yes, you too."

O'Brien pocketed the phone and made for the exit, Masters following. Tucked in behind an airport bus was a red Volvo estate, fifteen years old, scrapes and patches and a dented passenger door.

"Nice spot," she said.

"Official business. Put your bag in the back."

A musty smell. It was crammed with tools and marine gear, coils of rope, a fender, tins of paint and resin filler. She wedged her case between a metal tool-box and a jerrycan.

"How far is it?" she asked.

“Maybe an hour.”

They drove East, the roads jammed with commuters, white vans and Dutch juggernauts making for Harwich. The sun was a pale disk, like a full moon, its rim filtered out by the morning haze. On the horizon a line of poplars hovered above the mist. They passed across open country, fields ploughed up after the harvest, villages with antique shops and gastro-pubs.

“Rich area,” said Masters.

“Essex.”

“Very pretty. Is this where she lives?”

“Next village.”

Great Leffingham had a long main street with a wine bar, Tudor style hotel, delicatessen, two smart boutiques, but also an Oxfam clothes shop and one-price store with plastic goods and brushes and dusters, and Wang’s Golden Fry Fish and Chips. On the outskirts was a showroom for Porsches and 4WDs and a garden centre advertising conservatories and pool installations. O’Brien turned into a side road, a cul-de-sac with half a dozen large houses. At the end was a set of wrought iron gates. Pulling out, too fast for the corner, was a dirty white van with bold lettering: “Mersea Island fisheries. Best Colchester Oysters.” O’Brien braked hard.

“Somebody in a hurry,” said Masters, turning to watch the van accelerate away.

“You can’t have oysters going off.”

“Do you know how she’s taken it? She’s not been over to see the body. The ... the torso? Is that right?”

A paved drive and two acres of garden, mainly grass, surrounded by Leylandii, ten feet high and sculpted into a hedge, the sides sloping in at the bottom. Few flowers or trees. The drive led up to a sprawling two-storey house, parked outside of which were a red BMW, top of the range, and a silver Range Rover. It was a modern mansion, but the architect hadn’t got the proportions right, squeezing in too many windows. Two shiny columns flanked the front door.

O'Brien pulled a brass handle which set off a loud clanging. Then barking. He pulled again. A minute later there was shouting and then the door opened. A girl with tousled blonde hair, dark at the roots. Smearred make-up, fine eyebrows. She had green eyes, strangely distant, set in a face that bordered on the beautiful, but for a small mouth. Her skin was soft, creamy complexion. She was bursting out of silk pyjamas, and barely covered by a skimpy towel gown. Her body was just on the right side of the line between Junoesque and chubby. She was very young.

"They attack strange men." Surly voice. She looked past Masters and glued her eyes to O'Brien.

"How many are there?" asked O'Brien.

"Just two."

"Dobermans?"

"That's right. Don't worry, I've shut them in."

O'Brien spoke softly, his voice gentle now. "Are you Miss Tate? I'm Inspector O'Brien. This is Detective Sergeant Masters. I'm very sorry about the news, Miss Tate. I know this is a bad time for you. We'd like to talk to your mother."

The young woman gave the briefest nod and then turned and shouted. "Mum!"

They stepped into the hall. Curved staircase with ornate banisters wound up to the first floor. Deep-pile carpet, cream, with a flashy design in blue and gold. The wallpaper was striped, orange and maroon, with the same heraldic pattern at floor level. The air was hot and humid, with the smell of lemon and dog. A woman in a yellow jump-suit appeared with a glass in one hand and cigarette in the other.

"Inspector O'Brien?"

"Mrs Tate. This is DS Masters."

"They said you were coming today. That's why I needed this. Care for one?"

O'Brien shook his head.

"Early, I grant you. But I've not had a drop for three days. Isn't that right, Linda?"

The daughter nodded. "I'm going back to my room, Mum. Will you be OK?"

"Sure."

"Call if you want me. I think Valodya is up."

"Where are the dogs?"

"In the dining room."

"They're quiet."

"I gave them some chocolate drops." Linda Tate pouted at O'Brien, then turned on her heel and walked smartly up the stairs. "You've got yourself a fan there, Inspector," growled Mrs Tate. "Teenagers! All hormones, isn't it? Come in and sit down."

"Mrs Tate, we know this is a terrible time for you," began O'Brien.

"Spare me all that, Inspector. You've got a job to do and I'll help you all I can to find the .. the..." Her voice wavered. She smelled of alcohol.

It was a large room, but the ceilings were too low. Glass doors led out to a conservatory and swimming pool. Fluffy white carpeting, with stains, walls covered with glossy patterned paper. Huge sofa in soft, cream leather with three matching chairs. In one corner the statue of a young man holding a bunch of grapes, vaguely Ancient Greek, some shiny material, fake marble. Another corner held a wood carving, probably African, a life-size woman, big, curvy, sensual.

Linda Tate sat on the sofa and stretched out her legs. She was in her early forties, voluptuous, carrying a stone too much weight, breasts conspicuous, a bright yellow blonde with a fair complexion. Her face would have been stunning once, in a doll-like way, and it was still striking, but now blurred around the edges, the puffiness of the drinker.

"Have you seen him? How is he?"

Masters nodded. "He's very well looked after. And they're trying everything to ... to make contact. They've got psychologists..."

"Psychologists!" Jeannie Tate sneered. "Harry would have loved that. Bunch of cretins, that's what he called them. Have they found out how it happened?"

“Sorry, what do you mean?”

“How it happened? Was it operations?”

“The surgeons say it must have taken a whole series of operations. Over several months. Very skilled work.”

She drank again. “Why didn’t they just kill him and be done with it?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out, Mrs Tate. We need to talk to anybody who knew him, any business associates.”

“He was inside the last four years.”

“We’re going to Barton later today. But he was out for a month before he disappeared.”

“What is it you need to know?”

“What was he doing in that month? Where was he?”

“He was here.” Hand shaking, she lit a fresh cigarette with the stub.

“Did he travel?” asked O’Brien. “Any business trips?”

“He was going to go to Russia. You think he was up to something, don’t you?” She narrowed her eyes. “He just wanted to get on with his business. He made a stupid mistake with that job, but it was only because the business was in trouble. He needed the capital. Blame the government with their bloody bureaucracy.”

Masters nodded. “Do you have any idea, Mrs Tate, any idea at all who might want to do this?”

Jeannie Tate shook her head. Tears filled her eyes and she took a swig.

“I’m sorry, we know this is hard, but was there somebody he upset? Did he have enemies?”

“Of course he had enemies. A man like Harry always has enemies. He was strong, he didn’t take any nonsense. But he treated me right, and Linda, he really looked after us. I loved him, I respected him. Even when he was inside. But he was a jealous man, very jealous. If anybody so much as looked at me they’d better watch out. Like the way you’re looking at me, Inspector O’Brien.” She burst out laughing. “Just teasing. You ought to meet my sister-in-law, then

you'd really stare. I think you'd really take to our Tricia. She's Irish too. Not that you'd know it, not at all, such a fine lady." She emptied her glass. "You sure you'll not have a drink?"

She rose from the sofa and carefully made for the corner of the room, which was occupied by an elaborate piece of furniture, shiny black wood, chrome and glass. It was a bar, and she helped herself to a long measure of gin.

"They all respected him. He always played fair in business."

"Did he have any Irish business connections? Did he know anyone in Dublin?"

"Not that I knew of. I don't think he'd ever been to Ireland. He said they were all drunks and terrorists." She gave a shrill peal of laughter. One of her heels gave way and she stumbled. The glass flew from her hand. Masters was quickly on her feet and helped her to the sofa.

"Get me another for God's sake," snapped Jeannie Tate.

Masters nodded. "Lovely room, Mrs Tate." Above the bar she noticed a photograph, about a foot square, in a silver frame engraved with vines and foliage. The photograph showed a man standing with his arms around two women, one Jeannie Tate, the other a slim, beautiful, woman, also blonde, honey blonde, altogether classier. The man was solid, with big shoulders and arms, with a rugged face and square chin. He was laughing. As far as she could tell it was the same face that she had seen in Dublin.

"Is that a picture of your husband, Mrs Tate?" She handed her the glass of gin.

She nodded.

"How long ago was that taken?"

"I don't know. Maybe five years ago, but then again maybe ten." She took a large gulp of gin. "And that's the gorgeous Tricia, his sister-in-law. He never fancied her, just about the only man I know who didn't fancy our Tricia. There were girls, of course, lots of girls, he was that kind of man. But he always came back to me." She sobbed. "He always came back to me."

“Was there any girl in particular?” asked O’Brien.

She shrugged, then took another gulp.

“Could you think carefully?”

“There was one, a posh bitch who used to hang around. She even visited him in prison.”

“What was her name, do you remember?”

She shrugged. “Why do you want to know? It was years ago, before he went into Barton.”

“It might be important.”

She closed her eyes and sat in silence for few seconds, working the muscles around her mouth. “Gloria. I remember it now, funny name for a slut.” She started to sob, punctuating the silence in a measured way. A quick breath, then a pause, then more sobs.

“Mrs Tate ... ”

The sobs grew longer and louder, racking her body.

“Mrs Tate... ”

Masters shifted on her feet uneasily, glancing at O’Brien. “What shall we do?” she whispered.

O’Brien was staring out of the window.

“It’s like she’s forcing herself.”

The sobs were now interspersed with wailing noises.

“She’s had a few,” growled O’Brien.

A man entered the room and strode over to her. He was spare, dark, wearing tight trousers and a black silk shirt. He sat down beside her, sliding an arm around her shoulders.

“It’s OK, Jeannie, I’m here. Valodya take care of you, take care of everything.”

She laid her head on his shoulder and her sobs subsided. The man sat very still, and his eyes seemed to be focused on something out in the garden. Then he turned to O’Brien and Masters, staring at each of them in turn, blank expression, a long silence in the room. O’Brien met his gaze. Masters shifted on her feet, looking past the man’s right shoulder, then back to his face, smiling, then glancing at O’Brien. O’Brien winked.

Suddenly the man gave a broad smile. "I'm Valodya, house guest, friend of the family. You the policemen?" He had a heavy accent. He laughed, almost convincing. "We Russians always know policemen. Plenty of practice, dodging KGB. You want another drink, Jeannie?" He stood. "You guys want a drink? I brought over some good Russian vodka. Direct from Petersburg. Stolichnaya. The best."

They both declined the offer.

"I never drink myself. I guess I must be the only Russian who doesn't drink. Maybe I can help you guys? Harry Tate was a very good friend of mine. Business associate. I guess you want to find out everything, find out who could have done such a crazy, horrible thing. I think" he looked down at Mrs Tate. "Shall we talk outside?"

Jeannie shook her head. "No, Valodya, I want to hear what they have to say."

"Sure, Jeannie, sure ... so how can we help you?"

"What exactly was your connection with Harry Tate, Mr ..?"

"Call me Valodya. The rest is big mouthful. Like I said, we were friends. And we were doing business. I needed English partner."

"What kind of business?"

"Import, export."

"What sort of imports?"

Linda Tate entered, glaring at Debbie Masters. "I've called Uncle Simon. He's on his way."

"Good, good," said Valodya.

"What sort of imports?" repeated Masters.

He laughed. "You name it, we buy it, if the price is right. All the new industries in Russia, plenty of good business. Your nice Mr Blair makes this very good country for good business. We all get rich, everybody happy."

"Who else was involved?"

"I wanted Harry's brother to come in with us, that's what Harry wanted. Simon Tate, very sharp guy. Tough, but fair. You'll see him. Good guy."

“But he didn’t come in with you?”

Valodya hesitated. “He was thinking about it.”

Jeannie Tate snorted. “Too high and mighty now, our Simon.”

“Harry Tate had connections that he made in Barton, he went back to visit a man called Martin Cotton.”

The Russian nodded. “Harry knew Cotton when he was inside, but there was no business deal going with him. Cotton is nobody, just an animal. Maybe Harry was trying to help him. He was a kind man, you know, tough, sure thing, a real man’s man, but good heart.”

Jeannie began to sob again. “I didn’t like that man Cotton.”

“You met Martin Cotton?” asked O’Brien.

“One time when I was visiting Harry introduced me. Smarmy type. Queer.”

“Do you know why he visited him after he was released?”

“I didn’t want Harry going back to see him.”

“How often did he go back?”

Valodya replied for her. “He only went back a couple of times. Harry said he owed him a favour. Cotton helped him when he was inside. There are some bad guys in Barton, almost like the gulag places, huh!”

“Mrs Tate?”

“I don’t know.” She sobbed. “I don’t know.” She started sobbing again. “We were going to have such a good life, we were going to start all over again. How could this happen? How could it? How could you let it happen?” The sobbing was getting louder. “With Linda growing up we were going to have more time together. We’d drifted apart.” She laughed wildly. “Prison does that. But he never stopped loving me.”

“Maybe you guys should come back again some other time,” said Valodya, his face hardening up. He looked as if he could turn nasty, but was holding himself in check, weighing up what he could get away with. “This is getting kind of serious, no?”

Jeannie Tate was now wailing.

“One more thing, Mrs Tate,” said O’Brien, “did Harry say

anything about Gloria after he came out of Barton? Was he still seeing her?"

"Gloria? Gloria! That fucking slag. She was nothing to him, just a lay."

O'Brien turned to Valodya.

"Did you know Gloria?"

The Russian made a vague movement with his hands. The sound of wailing was filling the house.

"It's horrible, it's so horrible. How could it happen? Why? WHY? Why are you doing this to me? How can you come here at a time like this?"

"Mrs Tate," began Masters, "we just need ... "

"I don't know anything. I can't help you." Her sobs slowly died away. Suddenly she looked up and her face brightened.

A man stood at the door. He was tall, with a muscular frame and shoulders, long limbs, wearing casual country clothes, immaculate fit. He had golden curly hair and a striking face, wide, almost triangular in shape, a face that you looked at more than once.

"Uncle Simon," cried Linda, running to him. "Mum's in a real state."

"I tell them this isn't a good time," said Valodya sourly.

Tate stepped forward and held out his hand. A large hand, warm. "You're Inspector O'Brien? Sergeant? I'm Simon Tate, Harry's brother." He turned to Jeannie Tate. "You OK, Jeannie?"

"They were asking about Gloria," she sniffed.

Tate nodded. "Look, Inspector, Sergeant, I think we should talk outside."

They left Jeannie Tate with her daughter and the Russian. Nobody said goodbye. A Mercedes, top of the range, was parked next to O'Brien's Volvo. O'Brien, Masters and Tate stood between the two vehicles.

"She'll settle down," said Tate. "She's always been emotional, Jeannie, but this business ... It's enough to derange anyone. You wanted to know about Gloria? It was quite a while back, maybe two

years, but she was bad news. She led Harry quite a dance. He was a bit naïve, Harry, a sucker for a pretty face.”

“She visited him in Barton?”

Tate nodded. “Until she met Jason Carter-Brown, another Barton graduate. Charming lad, had a way with him. She ran off with him to London. But they split up and he came back alone. He might know where she is. But you’ll have to find him first.”

“And where is he?”

Tate laughed. “He disappeared. Taking twenty grand of Harry’s with him. Harry and Valodya wanted to give him a chance, took him into their business. Two months ago he broke his parole and hasn’t been seen since.”

“And you think he could be with Gloria?”

“I don’t think so, but he might know where she is. As a matter of interest, Inspector, why Gloria? Harry hadn’t seen her in two years.”

“It’s a line of enquiry.”

“Was there more to their relationship?”

“That’s what I’d like to find out. And about your brother’s business partner. What can you tell us about Mr Dzerzhinsky?”

“I know Valodya has a record. To be honest, I didn’t want Harry doing business with him. What’s legal or illegal over there, who’s on the level, is anybody’s guess. To be fair, Valodya came with good credentials, government contacts here and in Russia. Harry took up references from some very respectable people, bankers and the like, all spoke highly of him. I could give you some very familiar names, well in with Number Ten.”

“But you don’t trust him?”

Tate hesitated. “You might say it’s hypocritical, with my own background. People should have a second shot. But Harry’s my brother and I didn’t want him taking chances. There’s something not right about Valodya.”

Masters coughed. “Your background?”

“I have a criminal record.” Tate eased his hand through his thick hair. “All this has been a hell of a shock and I’d prefer to not to talk

about it right now. You can find out easily enough. I run a building firm, with land development.”

“Simon Tate Enterprises?” put in Masters.

“You know it?”

“Hard to miss.”

“I’m a good businessman. Sadly, Harry wasn’t, which is why he took a short cut, landing him up in Barton. Basically Harry is lazy. He liked all the trappings, the good life, but not the hard work.” He shook his head. “He was so full of life, loved food, drink, music, good cigars, all the pleasures. What’s happened to him is terrible.”

“We saw the oyster van.”

He chuckled. “He loved oysters, he could eat six or seven dozen at a sitting. It wasn’t easy, getting oysters into Barton. He wasn’t a bad man, Christ, there we go, isn’t a bad man. He made a mistake, trying to provide for his family, went about it the wrong way instead of coming to me. Look, Inspector, Sergeant, this might seem odd, time like this, but we’re having a party on Saturday. Just a stand-up do, drinks and snacks. I was going to cancel, but Jeannie insisted, said Harry wouldn’t want that. Why not come along? There will be people who knew Harry.”

Masters glanced at O’Brien.

“Think about it, you might find it useful. You a sailor, Inspector? I noticed the RYA sticker on your car. I’ve got a nice little ketch down on the Colne, hope to manage one more trip this season.” He reached out and put a hand on his arm. His voice faltered. “Find out who did this to my brother, Inspector. You can see what it’s doing to our family.”