

THE WINTER GUEST

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For Alicia

CHAPTER 1

Kilcolgan House stands at the end of the long drive, caught by a moment of moonlight. Its granite walls, slick with the earlier rain, shine silver; its roof glows; its many large windows are like mirrors to the sky. The bad weather has passed for the moment and only the breath of a breeze flutters the long grass in the home meadow. From the strand, through the trees, the roll of the waves can be heard. Here, at the house, the only sound is the steady drip of leaking gutters.

It is a large house, built to reflect the significance of the family who built it. It stands on a rise that overlooks the sea and the surrounding country. When the original Prendevilles – hard-knuckled invaders in the service of a Tudor monarch – took the land, the first house they built was a bastion to defend against the people from whom the land was taken. It had thick walls and high, small windows, and a courtyard into which livestock could be brought in times of trouble. The bastion still stands within the dwelling that took its place, built onto and around and through. The older structure within accounts for the strange shapes of certain rooms and some, at least, of the draughts and creaks and other phenomena that the Prendevilles and their few remaining

retainers barely notice. What might seem odd to a stranger is, to them, quite usual. They are accustomed to the ways of the house; they know its whims. Prendevilles have become part of the fabric of the house; the dead living on in the stories held within its walls.

The house, despite its grandeur, has seen better days. The moon is kind to it, but its slates are no longer regular; moss fills each crack and gap in the stonework and, in the daylight, there is an air of abandonment about the place. The future of the house is no longer certain. If the Prendevilles are aware of this, they show no sign of it, continuing on in long-accustomed inertia, while the house slowly disintegrates around them.

Within the house, most are asleep. All except for Bridget, a housemaid, who sits in the entrance hall, wrapped in the butler's greatcoat, alongside the glowing embers that are all that is left of a peat fire that burns there throughout the day. She stares into it, mesmerised, and then, before long, she too is asleep.

Outside, a sea mist creeps up over the long beach, then, slowly, makes its way across the rocks, the road, the demesne wall. It hides the men who walk within it – men carrying rifles in their hands and blankets slung across their chests. They wear long coats, collars pulled up against the cold, and flat caps that would obscure their eyes, were there light enough to see them. For two years now the men, and others like them, have been fighting for the independence of their country. It has been a long and bloody war and the men on the coast road are tired of it, but still they walk towards Kilcolgan. The fog does not slow them. They know where they are going. They climb the wall where it has tumbled inwards and then they are among the trees, as is the mist. They slip through the bushes and low-hanging branches until they find the drive that leads to

the big house, where the commander orders two of the men to the small cottage standing beside the gate. Its inhabitants know better than to resist; they allow themselves to be bound and gagged, then are lowered carefully to the floor, where they lie, listening as the men make their preparations in the dark. They hear the sound of a tree trunk being dragged across the avenue and the commander's quiet orders as he positions the men of the flying column.

Soon all is quiet and the men wait in the bushes with the mist gathering around them. Their fingers are stiff around the guns they hold, but they are used to the cold. They breathe on their hands to put some heat into them and think, perhaps, of warm beds they have known in the past. They are patient.

Then, in a pause between the breaking waves, they hear the drone of a motor car approaching from the west, the direction they have been told to expect it from. The fog thins for a moment and they can see the white glow of approaching headlights. They lean forwards, lifting their weapons in preparation, smelling the oil and metal of the rifles as they bring them close to their cheeks. The car is getting closer now, and its engine seems to vibrate through their entire bodies, shattering the stillness that came before. The gates have been left open for it and there is only the slightest reduction in speed before the twin beams that are the car's headlights, blurred by the fog, swing in. The engine is now louder still, perhaps amplified or distorted by the fog, and it feels as though it is coming straight at them. Someone fires a shot, just at the moment that the driver sees the log that has been dragged across the driveway, and the car swerves into the wall of the gate lodge. There is a screeching and tearing of metal, and then nothing except for the low coughing rumble from the engine, which still turns over.

The men wait in the dark, listening for an order, the only sound a scrape of metal as the car sags. One of the headlights has survived, lighting the gate lodge and revealing the car's long, black shape. After a moment, a man stands up in the open car, a pistol in his hand. The firing starts again, each shot like a hammer on the nail of a coffin.

Afterwards, the commander walks over to the motor car, his pistol at the ready. The men follow, rifles shivering in their hands; they are not certain if it is from cold or the excitement of it all. A bullet has taken away much of the face of the man behind the wheel, but they recognise him from the bottle green of his uniform and the crowns on his epaulette. Beside him lies a young man wearing a black bow tie, with a pistol in his hand. They do not know him, but they decide he is no innocent. The woman in the back seat is a different matter; she has not been hit by any of their bullets and is alive, but unconscious. They find a blanket for her in the car's boot and make her comfortable, but they do not stay to tend to her. The police from the town will be here soon, and the work they came to do is done.

The men leave, walking quickly away through the trees. They will walk until the morning and then rest up in a house that is expecting them. The Prendeville woman is a bad bit of business, but they hope she will survive. How could they have known she would be in the car? She, of all people, should have known better.

They leave behind the occupants of the car, their shapes indistinct in the mist that still moves slowly across the tableau, bringing with it the damp smell of the sea to blend with the stench of cordite and blood.

Harry Cartwright, formerly of the British Army, lies awkwardly over the back of the passenger seat, his head and hair hanging

down behind it. His fingers still grasp for the revolver he took from Inspector Teevan's holster to defend himself, and which was taken from his dead hand by one of the ambushers. There is not much blood, at least not that can be seen at first. Cartwright's face is largely unmarked except for a tiny hole above the hairline where a small-calibre bullet caught him just after he stood up in his seat and found himself looking down to where another bullet had hit him in the chest.

The body of District Inspector James Teevan is slumped behind the steering wheel, a victim of that single first shot. The men of the flying column were pleased to have killed him, holding him responsible for recent reprisals carried out by a company of the Auxiliary Division of the RIC based in the town. The Auxies, as they are known, are mostly British ex-officers, veterans at a loose end after the brutality of the Western Front, and not really under any man's command, except perhaps for Major Abercrombie. It was Abercrombie who led the Auxies who burned out nine cottages on the other side of the hills three days before. Abercrombie took the three local men from the burning buildings, who showed up dead the morning after. The burning of the dwellings and the killing of the men were a message to the rebels, and this was their reply. It is a long-running correspondence between the two sides. The correspondence will continue tomorrow and in the weeks that follow, back and forth. It does not matter much to either side that the victims of their reprisals are often undeserving.

The final occupant lies in the back seat, her arm across her forehead as though to shield herself from the little light there is, the blanket wrapped round her. Maud Prendeville's face – as much of it as can be seen – is still. The men, knowing her and her family, have made her comfortable. The Honourable Maud Prendeville,

after all, is a hero of the struggle for independence who fought beside Pearse and Connolly in the Easter Rising. She is the last person the men of the flying column would have wanted to hurt.

Inside the gate lodge, Patrick Walsh, gatekeeper and gardener, lies alongside his wife upon the flagstone floor of their small kitchen, hands and feet bound. He has heard the men discuss Maud Prendeville. Now he works with his wife to release the cords that tie his hands, anxious to help the daughter of his employer, whom he has known since she was a child. They curse each other as they fumble with the knots, but the task is difficult and the progress is slow and the minutes are ticking by.

Through the trees, although it cannot be seen from the gate, lamplight colours the windows of Kilcolgan House yellow, one after another. Other members of the Prendeville family are gathering in the cold entrance hall in dressing gowns, alerted by the gunfire, their faces anxious in the candlelight. Maud's sister, Charlotte, asks if someone has already dropped their house guest, Harry Cartwright, back from the card evening, and looks grave when the answer comes that he has not. Bridget, the servant girl, is sent to fetch Billy from his room but she does not find him there, although he will soon arrive from the direction of the stables. In a few minutes his father, Lord Kilcolgan, Charlotte, Billy and Sean Driscoll, the housekeeper's son, will make their way down to the gate. For the moment, however, they hesitate, perhaps because while they remain uncertain about what has happened, there is still hope.

If, at their moment of indecision, someone were standing beside the wreck of Teevan's car, they would see a figure approaching through the trees. The mist and the dark would make it hard for them to tell if the figure is male or female, young or old, or anything much about them, except that they seem to know their way. They take

their time, yes, but they move with purpose and seem to know how remote the place is and that the gunfire can only have been heard by the Prendevilles up at the house, if it has been heard at all. Pat Walsh and his wife can be discounted, they decide. They are certain they will have been tied up by the ambushers – it is the usual way these things are handled.

The Prendevilles are not an immediate risk. The house is a walk along the drive and the family will not rush into the dark to confront men with guns. Who would? They will call the RIC station in the town, of course, but the call will have to go through the exchange, which takes time. While the station possesses a number of Crossley Tenders that could make the journey in a quarter of an hour if they drove at full speed, the constables will have to be woken and organised. When they do come, they will come carefully, conscious of the risk of a second ambush. In summary, the chances of interruption are slight.

Inside the cottage, Pat Walsh grunts as his hand at last comes free. Then he hears the sound of the approaching footsteps, barely scraping the gravel, and he knows it is not the police or the family from the house. Walsh rubs at his wrists and whispers to his wife, who whispers back. Then they are silent.

As the figure comes closer to the car, the remaining headlight gives out, leaving behind a profound darkness before the soft yellow beam of a trench torch illuminates the car, then the victims and finally the windows of the gate lodge. Nothing stirs in the silence.

Cartwright is checked for signs of life, although the examination is perfunctory. It is a shame about Cartwright; he had no part in this business. No time at all is spent on Teevan and there is no regret at his passing. And then the figure leans over Maud Prendeville – surprised to find her here but accepting her presence. When Maud's

wrist is lifted to check her pulse, the young woman's eyes flicker for a moment but she does not wake.

Eventually, after some time spent contemplating the prostrate Miss Prendeville, the figure seems to come to a decision and turns their attention back to Teevan. The inspector is searched efficiently and thoroughly but not, apparently, with any success. Cartwright is then also searched, and it is noticeable that there is no squeamishness; this is a person used to blood and death. It is also clear they intend their search to be undetected. The figure wears thin kidskin gloves, so that no awkward trace is left on a surface. Each button that is undone is done up again. When the inspector's coat is opened to check his inner pockets, it is replaced just so.

Once Cartwright and Teevan have been checked, and then checked again, the figure turns their attention to the car, opening the glove compartment and the side pockets and looking under the seats. A document case is found in the boot and it is gone through quickly. Nothing. And then the figure turns their attention to Maud Prendeville.

Maud is wearing a long black velvet travelling coat, and clutched in her left hand is a small evening bag. The coat has pockets, but the bag seems more likely. It requires some careful effort to detach the bag from Maud's grip, but then it is open and there is the item which the figure has been searching for. They had not expected to find it in her possession, but perhaps they should have. The handbag is returned to the young woman, empty now. Then the figure hesitates, looking over their shoulder, peering into the misty darkness, crouching down and turning off their torch as they do so.

It is more of a feeling than anything. They have heard nothing definite. There is hardly any breeze, certainly not enough to shift the leaves or move a branch – the sea mist barely moves at all.

And yet there is a sense of someone out there – or perhaps something – and an unexpected scent that is both sweet and corrupt. For a moment, the figure thinks it sees the pale shape of a woman moving through the mist, but when they look again there is nothing. They shiver involuntarily, all the same. They have heard the stories about the big house and the coast road and the Prendevilles. This evening is not the first tragedy to come to pass in this place, and the Prendevilles have been an unlucky family through the centuries. Some say cursed. But that is all nonsense and time is passing. The torch is turned on one last time to make certain all is left as it should be. The figure takes the opportunity to light a cigarette and turns back to the business in hand.

When they do so, the yellow beam of light finds Maud Prendeville's wide gaze staring upwards at them, her mouth a round O of surprise. Is there recognition? Perhaps the figure thinks so. Because they take a small pistol from their pocket, lean forwards so that it is only a matter of inches from Maud Prendeville's appalled gaze, and fire. Once is sufficient. The dilemma is no longer a dilemma.

The figure turns, without any detectable emotion, and walks back the way they came. They do not hear the sobbing from Patrick Walsh's kitchen, and it is just as well.

If the dead at the gate lodge could speak, they might tell of their hopes for a future that will not come to pass. They might talk of their loves, for they did love and were loved in turn. Those that love them will mourn them, and those that did not, will not. In time, they will pass from memory and be forgotten.

But in this place, each mist that comes in from the sea, each breeze that stirs the heather, will carry the whisper of them always.

Even if the living do not hear it.

CHAPTER 2

When Tom Harkin leaves the pub, it is nearly midnight – and it is too late. Much too late. He can't remember a thicker fog. He can taste it on his tongue like wet charcoal. On top of which the Corporation, in protest at the British curfew, turns off the electricity at half past eleven these days. He looks down at the yellow semicircle of light from the doorway in which his polished black boots stand, tendrils of mist from the river swirling slowly around them, and he thinks about the warmth he is leaving and the darkness of the journey ahead. He pulls up the collar of his coat and tightens his belt, but already the cold has crept inside to his skin.

'Good luck,' Malone says, blurred, even though only a few feet separate them.

Then the door is shut and the light gone, and Harkin sighs because, on top of everything else, he is wearing the wrong boots. He takes three steps. *Click*, *clack*, *click*. He will have to walk on his toes. Like a ballerina. And it is four miles to Ballsbridge, in the fog, to where his other pair, the brown ones with the rubber heels, await him. If he gets there.

As soon as he steps off the pavement, he can see nothing – he must feel his way along the street, towards the river, listening for other footsteps and half-wishing he'd taken the revolver Malone had offered him, before he remembers the weight of a gun in his hand and he shivers.

This war against British rule is on a different scale from the war he fought in France. The battles now are between handfuls of men, but the killing is still the same. He knows there are sentries and patrols and checkpoints between him and his home, and every policeman and soldier will have their finger on the trigger of a gun. He has a pass that allows him to be out during the curfew hours, thanks to a highly placed official in the government administration based at Dublin Castle. If he is able to show his pass, he'll be fine. But will they even ask, what with the fog and not knowing if the footsteps in the dark might not belong to a man with another gun? He isn't sure, if he were in their shoes, if he would be able to stand there, waiting, and not fire – just to make whoever it is go back the way they came. He thinks about that fellow they shot off his bicycle the other night, on his way back home from a late shift at the Guinness brewery.

That fellow's pass was good too.

The mist clings to his face and clothes in a cold, damp sheen, and the cobblestones are slippery underfoot. The temptation is to walk quickly, to warm himself up, but if he takes his time, he can listen and make less noise. The city is quiet, but not silent. The sound of a foghorn, muffled and lonely, comes along the river from the port and he can hear conversations in the houses he passes, and once a gramophone.

He considers his options – Sackville Street is to be avoided. There are sentries outside the GPO and O'Connell Bridge is always

guarded. Capel Street is a possibility, but then he hears the distinctive rattle and wheeze of a Crossley Tender from that direction and adjusts his course to avoid it, making his way down a narrower street that runs parallel. The Crossley comes to a halt somewhere and he can hear shouting – English voices – but it isn't for him. He steps into a doorway all the same, finding the breath in his chest hard to come by, and waits until the Crossley moves off. He follows the noise of it as it goes towards the river. He thinks they must have been Auxies; their accents were those of the officer class rather than the other ranks that make up the Black and Tans, the other temporary RIC recruited from Britain. Then he can't hear the tender anymore and he is unsure if it has travelled out of earshot or perhaps come to another halt. He knows how fog can alter sound, and he wants to be certain it is safe before he goes forwards.

He curses Malone. Three hours late for the meeting, and there had been nothing he could do except wait for him. The list that he brought with him, now in the breast pocket of Harkin's jacket, is as good as a death sentence if an Auxie patrol searches him. The thought of it makes the adrenaline course through his body. Somewhere above him a baby begins to cry and he listens as the mother soothes the child back to sleep. He hears the bells from Christ Church ring for midnight. When they finish, and he has heard nothing more of the Auxies, he forces himself out of the doorway, keeping to the same slow, steady pace, preparing himself to answer the challenge if it comes, listening for anything that might signal danger.

He needs to get across the river. O'Connell Bridge, to his left, will be too dangerous, and the possible presence of the Crossley rules out trying Grattan Bridge, which spans the river to his right.

He feels boxed in, with only the Ha'penny Bridge, the narrow pedestrian arch between the alternative crossings, as a possibility. It's not the worst option, however. There is a better chance it will be unguarded than the others. He reaches the end of the street, and he knows from the dank, fetid smell that the river is just ahead of him. He listens for a moment, uncertain where the bridge is from where he is standing. He knows the city well, but he has lost his bearings somewhere along the way and he stands there, panic building, unable to decide whether to go forward until he finds the embankment wall or stay where he is until he is sure it is safe.

He is still frozen in indecision when he hears a low voice, to his left. An English voice. He can't make out the words, but he can hear someone responding and then the scrape of a match. He holds his breath and listens to the metallic sound of a car door opening and then closing. The Auxies. He wants to go back the way he came, but his feet seem to be stuck to the pavement. He knows this kind of fear from France and he knows he will get past it in a few moments. Not entirely, of course – fear doesn't just switch itself off – but enough to be able to move and think. He forces his lungs to take in some air and then slowly exhales, listening to the Auxies murmuring to each other.

Then he hears the sound of a rifle bolt being pulled back.

He is still standing there, locked into the box of his own terror, when he feels, to his surprise, a soft hand take his elbow. It pushes him gently forwards and he does not resist. He knows, somehow, that he is being helped. When he hears the Crossley's engine start up, seemingly only a few yards away, he allows himself to be directed, more quickly now, until he can make out the shape of the narrow entrance to the cast-iron bridge only a few steps ahead of him. There is no guard on it that he can see. To his left, the headlamps of the

Crossley are turned on. He walks forwards, hearing the hollow noise of his feet on the bridge, hoping the sound will be inaudible to the Auxies over the engine. He looks back to see the twin beams of light on Ormond Quay, blurred by the fog but not more than fifty yards from the bridge's entrance. His helper pushes him forwards once again and he takes the hint, encouraged by a shout from the direction of the Crossley, and walks across the bridge as quickly and quietly as he can.

When he turns to thank his saviour, there is no one there, only the faintest scent of a woman's perfume.

He remembers the perfume. Even though he has not smelled it for several years.