FATAL PRACTICE

Acclaim for Paul Carson

SCALPEL

'As bad a baddie as Hannibal Lecter … a fast pace and energetic storyline,' *Irish Times*

'Thoroughly enjoyable … Paul Carson is a name to watch. Top marks on the 'hard to put down scale.' *Evening Herald*

'An undeniably compelling chiller,' *GQ*

'This wonderfully tense read gleefully twists and gnaws at the nerves and has a terrifying sense of "it could really happen" about it. Superb.' *The Big Issue*

'A brilliant debut … a first-rate thriller.' *London Magazine*

'Written with tremendous pace … a first-class thriller,' *Sunday Tribune*

'A pacy thriller guaranteed to get the heart beating faster,' *Irish Independent*

COLD STEEL

'The John Grisham of medical fiction.' *Sunday Independent*

FINAL DUTY

'Paul Carson is the master of the medical thriller.' *Irish Times*

'Carson's pace is helter-skelter … a first-class thriller.' *Sunday Tribune*

BETRAYAL

'Chilling. Grabs you by the throat from the first page and never lets go. If Betrayal doesn't keep you reading through the night, nothing will. A topsy-turvy thriller with a wonderfully satisfying conclusion.' *Chris Stewart, author of The Fourth War and the God of War.*

'A satisfying, character-driven, plot-twist-intensive medical thriller. Fans of Michael Plamer and Tess Gerritsen will want to add Carson to their to-read lists.' *Booklist*

'A terrific read.' *The Irish Times*

'A pacy thriller guaranteed to get the heart beating. A breakneck, thrilling ride.' *The Irish Independent*

INQUEST

'No. 1 Bestseller Paul Carson is back! Another great thrill-a-page read.' *writing.ie*

First published in 2026 by
Paul Carson, in partnership with Whitefox Publishing Ltd

www.paulcarson.ie
www.wearewhitefox.com

Copyright © Paul Carson, 2026

EU GPSR Authorised Representative
LOGOS EUROPE, 9 rue Nicolas Poussin, 17000,
LA ROCHELLE, France
E-mail: Contact@logoseurope.eu

ISBN 978-1-9181911-0-3
Also available as an eBook
ISBN 978-1-9181911-1-0
Also available as an audiobook
ISBN: 978-1-918191-65-3

Paul Carson asserts the moral right to be identified
as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the author.

While every effort has been made to trace the owners of copyright material reproduced herein, the author would like to apologise for any omissions and will be pleased to incorporate missing acknowledgements in any future editions.

Edited by Donna Hillyer and Shona Kinsella
Designed and typeset by Typo•glyphix
Cover design by Tomas Almeida
Project management by Whitefox Publishing

PAUL CARSON

FATAL PRACTICE



Fatal Practice is a work of fiction. Names, dates, characters, places, weather, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

PROLOGUE

Thursday 30th April 1987

THEY ARRIVED an hour before daybreak.

There were three of them, two gravediggers and a driver.

Take the black van, they were told.

Keep all the tools out of sight.

Drive slowly, and don't draw attention.

Don't ask questions.

It's the old chapel about a mile and a half from the village.

Use the hill road, it's quieter.

The chapel gates were open, and the driver eased the van to the side of the building. Then he switched the engine off. They stared into the gloom. High cypress trees on all sides overshadowed the area, making the darkness even darker. Above, no daybreak, just the night sky with the hint of early cloud from the west. The air was warm, heavy and muggy with the smell of cut silage. Somewhere a dog barked, and somewhere else cattle lowed. There were a few hesitant tweets. The dawn chorus was some time away.

The small, stone-grey granite chapel was to their left with a cemetery on the right.

The cemetery was as old as the turn-of-the-century chapel. At the far end, where the land rose, there were granite headstones. Closer, marble slabs with small statues. Some black and some grey. Most weather-worn, with names and dates faded. At the far end, a lonely and mournful orphans' plot. A fox padded between its nameless crosses, slinking to nothing in long grass.

'Spooky,' said one of the workmen.

'The weather's changing,' said the other. 'I can feel it in my feet.'

'We better get started,' said the driver. He reached for a torch and a map, opened the van door and made his way to the recent burial mounds. Under torchlight, he hunched and squinted. Next, he moved towards a crumbling stone wall boundary. There, he inspected the map, finally finding the plot. He called out, 'It's over here.'

The van was unloaded. A wheelbarrow, a pickaxe, two spades and two shovels. Six coffin straps. Thick tarpaulin. Two rickety arc lights on stands. Two portable batteries.

They grouped at the stone wall. And even though they hadn't lifted a spade or swung the pickaxe, they were sweating. And uneasy. The driver scuffed the heel of a boot along the ground. 'It's hard,' he said. 'There's been little rain.'

The priest was beside them before they knew it. They offered respectful hellos and stepped aside. The priest opened a prayer book and began a low chant. 'O Lord Jesus Christ, saviour of all souls, may you one day take us all to your heavenly mansion.' He made a Sign of the Cross and the men blessed themselves. 'You can go ahead,' he said.

'Start with a line at the top,' the driver said. He traced an edge with a spade, then heeled it deeper. 'This won't be easy.'

The arc lights were put in place, and the batteries lifted closer. The tarpaulin was laid out.

The priest walked away, leaving the gravediggers to their labour.

Now the arc lights flickered and glowed. The pickaxe swung in the air. A spade lifted earth. There were grunts and soft curses.

The driver hunched on his knees and lit a cigarette.

I wonder, he mused, *what this is all about?*

He inhaled, coughed and wiped phlegm from his lips.

I wonder what happened?

ONE.

THIS IS what happened.

Five weeks earlier, on Monday 30th March 1987, Dr Jakob Kane fielded a call from a medical employment agency. Kane had just returned to Ireland after a twelve-month stint in Australia and was looking for work.

'General practice locum up for grabs,' he was told. 'And the pay sounds good.' He was given a name, Bob Welford, and directions to an office in South Dublin. 'Welford's a government trouble-shooter,' they said. 'Puts out small fires before they get out of control.'

'Bully for him,' muttered Kane. 'OK, I'll see what's on offer.'

The office was on the third floor of a grey stone building on Kildare Street. It was a small, stuffy room with unevenly painted white walls. There was one door and one window, and in the centre of the room was a chipped and stained Formica desk with a telephone and an empty in-tray. Two chairs faced one another. Welford was fifty-six, tall and tubby. He had a receding hairline with a narrow face and prominent teeth. That

day, he was squeezed into a too-tight brown suit. He sat with his back to the window.

'I need to recruit a doctor right away,' he began after introductions.

Kane settled into his chair. 'What's the hurry?'

'A GP in the townland of Cloughermar in county Cavan is out of action.' Welford sifted paperwork. 'He's been out for the past week, and the latest is he won't be back for another month.'

'And?' Kane tried to look interested.

'I've been instructed from on high' – Welford glanced upwards – 'to get somebody there ASAP. The town's in the constituency of a cabinet minister, and he wants to make himself look good. Keep the locals happy. They're complaining about having to drive miles to find a doctor.'

'What sort of practice is it?' Kane picked fluff off a trouser crease. He'd dressed for the meeting. His one and only dark navy two-piece suit over his one and only crisp white shirt and university tie. All to show off his suntan. He had a strong chin with a dimple, high forehead over slate grey eyes. He stood five feet ten inches tall in a stocky frame with a soft paunch. His sandy hair was a mess after a rush through rain showers. He massaged the scar that ran from his right ear to chin.

'Family medicine,' said Welford. 'Cloughermar's something between a big village and a small town in a farming area near the border. It shouldn't be too challenging for someone like you.' He tapped at paperwork. 'I read your CV,' he added. 'You did a lot in Australia.' Now he glanced at a page. 'Hospital and general practice. Strong references and a Certificate of Good Standing. Paid up medical indemnity.' He smiled. 'You're ideal. And ready to go as well.'

'I am.' Kane returned the smile.

Both men fell silent. Welford studying pages of text, Kane studying the ceiling.

Now Welford leaned forward. 'Before we go any further, can I check a few details?'

'Certainly,' said Kane.

'Simple stuff, really.' Welford separated pages. 'Sorry to bother you.'

'Go for it.'

'Your date of birth is February the sixth, nineteen-fifty-four, is that right?'

'Yes, I'm now thirty-three.'

Welford ticked that with a pencil. 'And it's Jakob Kane with a k, is that correct?'

'Yes, Jakob with a k.'

'And Moses?' Welford had an exaggerated mock puzzle-face. 'It's Jakob Moses Kane?'

'That's right.'

'Moses, like in the bible?'

'Moses, like in the bible,' agreed Kane.

'Very Old Testament.' Welford leaned back in his chair.

'I come from a religious family,' Kane explained. 'My father's a Baptist preacher, my mother used to take Sunday school for children and oversee bible reading.' He tugged at his shirt cuffs. 'They actually met at a junior Baptist assembly.'

'How sweet.' Welford now managed a proper smile. 'Quite the story.' He turned to a different page and studied it. 'And you, Dr Kane.' Now he focused on Kane. 'Are you a religious man?'

Kane's brow furrowed. 'Where's this leading, Mr Welford? I thought you were looking for a doctor?'

'I am.'

'So what's with all the religion questions?' Kane pressed.

'Let me explain,' Welford began. 'I read over your CV a few times and was mightily impressed.'

'Good,' said a now wary Kane.

'But' – Welford leaned towards Kane – 'being a good civil servant, I thought I'd double check everything.'

'Ahuh,' said Kane, wondering yet again where this was leading.

'Guess what I found out?'

'You tell me, Mr Welford. I'm not a mind reader.'

'I learned that you're no angel.' Now Welford was hard staring Kane.

'What do you mean?' Kane held the stare.

'Someone claimed your references don't tell the whole story.'

'I'm not with you,' said Kane. 'Who claimed what?'

Welford shifted in his swivel. 'I rang one of the referees to check the CV.'

'And?'

'He wasn't available, and I was put through to Dr Fred Hudson.' Welford tapped his pencil on the table. 'I'm sure you know Hudson. Certainly, he remembers you.'

Kane stiffened, then shuffled in his chair to give himself time to think. 'I do know Dr Hudson. He was one of the partners in the practice where I trained.'

Welford coughed slightly, then looked across, then down, then back to Kane. 'He hadn't a kind word to say about you.'

'Oh.' Kane tried to appear unruffled.

'Called you a real bad guy.'

'A real bad guy?' Kane spoke the words as if he were chewing them. 'He called me a real bad guy?'

'He said you were a drinker and a womaniser.'

Kane said nothing. Frowned at Welford, then looked to one side and studied the floor. Finally, 'Did he say anything else?'

'He said you were a good doctor, didn't deny that when I pressed him. But kept going on about you being a real bad guy.'

Now Kane pulled himself upright, pushed his chest out, clicked his neck from side to side. 'I am neither a bad guy nor a good guy,' he said. 'I'm somewhere in the middle. Fred Hudson is a small man who thinks that having a stethoscope hanging out the side of his pocket makes him look important. He's a pain in the arse born-again Christian. I know his sort, believe me. I know how they think. With their holier-than-thou mindset, nobody's right but them.'

'That may be true, Dr Kane,' Welford cut across. 'But he was adamant about your drinking and womanising.'

Kane folded his arms across his chest. 'Those are the words of a spiteful, vindictive and bitter little man and I'm not going to dignify them with a response.' He paused to let that sink in. 'He wouldn't have said that to my face.' Welford started to speak, but Kane waved at him to stop. 'If you're looking for a doctor who's a saint, then good luck. Let me know when you find him. I doubt it'll be before this Christmas or next Christmas. Or even the next hundred Christmases.' He glanced at Welford, unsure how to read him. 'At least Hudson admitted I was a good doctor. That's all that should concern you.'

'Argumentative,' said Welford.

'What?'

'Argumentative was another word Hudson used. He said you'd start a row in a telephone box.'

'Did he?' said Kane. 'That's just the sort of big word he'd look up in a dictionary, hoping he could use it someday.'

'Maybe,' said Welford. 'But you still haven't answered my question. Are you a drinker and a womaniser? Can I trust you with this locum job? It mightn't mean a lot to you, but it'll mean a lot to the townsfolk.'

Now Welford studied Kane.

Kane studied the ceiling again.

'Tell me more about the post,' said Kane. He needed time to respond. 'What happened to the doctor?'

There was an awkward silence as both men avoided eye contact. From next door came the clacking of typewriters and the soft murmur of conversation.

'I'll tell you what I know so far,' said Welford finally. 'His name is Dr James Killan and he's sixty-seven.' He tugged at his waistband. 'He finished an early surgery, locked the door, put his Gladstone bag in the boot of his Toyota Corolla and drove off. The next morning a farmer found him in a field surrounded by sheep. He'd been badly beaten.'

'Beaten?' Now Kane paid attention. 'Like beaten up?'

'Yes, beaten up.'

'Who'd assault a country GP?' Kane's interest was piqued.

'That's what everyone's asking,' said Welford. 'He's well-liked and respected. Served his community for years.'

'Any leads?'

Welford shook his head. 'No. The Guards believe it was a local thug looking for drugs.'

'There are easier ways to get drugs,' said Kane. 'Assaulting the GP isn't one of them.' He was relieved he'd diverted the conversation. 'Was his house burgled?'

'No.'

'What about his family?' Kane asked. 'How'd they take it?'

'He has two sons in their thirties, one in New York, the

other in Melbourne,' said Welford. 'Nobody's heard anything from them.'

'And his wife?'

'Martha's her name. She walked out on him six years ago. With her sons gone and only him and her at home, things got a bit tense.' Welford rested his chin on upturned knuckles. 'Martha got fed up cooking, cleaning and gardening. Packed her bags and went back to her family home in Dublin.' He shuffled in his chair. 'Between ourselves, I heard she had some sort of nervous breakdown.' He leaned across and mock-whispered. 'Killan's from a very rich family. They believe mental illness is a character flaw, an excuse to hide personal failings. I suspect a lot was hushed up.' He settled back with a 'now-you-know' face.

'But she must have called on him?' said Kane. 'Like, after he was found and hospitalised?'

'Apparently not.'

Kane frowned. 'That's strange.' The whole story was strange.

'It is indeed but that's the way of the world with the Killan family.'

'Does Killan have help around the house?'

'He has a loyal housekeeper called Imelda Speers. She cooks and cleans and more or less worships the ground he walks on.'

The room went quiet. Outside, traffic growled, and the wind shook the window frame.

'I'm under pressure here, Dr Kane.' Welford leaned forward. 'This recession is biting. Nobody has money. Emigration is dragging the good out of rural areas. Businesses closing, shop fronts shuttered, terrible air of despondency.' He looked over. 'Are you with me?'

Kane nodded.

'I want this post filled quickly, and I'm even prepared to hire a real bad guy as long as he's a competent doctor.'

'What's on offer?' asked Kane. The job was interesting. Straightforward but with a hint of mystery. He liked that.

'A four-week contract with a guarantee of eight thousand pounds.'

'Sounds OK,' said Kane. And I seriously need money, he didn't add.

'But if you fuck up, I'll come after you. I need to be sure you'll stay off booze and keep away from women for the next four weeks. That's not much to ask, is it?'

Kane's expression gave nothing away. 'It's your call, Mr Welford. You've read my references and there's no mention of drinking or womanising. I've a certificate of Good Standing and the medical board doesn't hand those out to misfits.' He offered Welford his most insincere smile. 'I'm here and ready to go. Or you can hang on until St Francis of Assisi shows up.'

Welford glared at him, pushed back from the desk and stood. Frowning, he made his way to the door, looking like he wanted to leave and not return. Instead, he leaned out and gave instructions before returning to his seat.

Moments later, a manila folder was handed across. Welford pored over the pages. 'Sign here and here.'



Afterwards, over coffee in a nearby hotel, Kane seethed. *So Fred Hudson called me a real bad guy. Well, screw him. What'd he imagine a single thirty-plus male would be? A teetotal celibate? Get*

a grip, Hudson. Better still, get a life. And if I got lucky with a few local women, so what? It was none of your business. Apart from Mrs Hudson, of course. But that was her idea, not mine.

However, when he calmed down, Kane silently conceded that Fred Hudson was right. He had been a drinker and womaniser.

As the second son of a functioning alcoholic evangelical pastor and beautiful, but witless, mother, he'd become a delayed social maturity rebel.

Belfast, where Kane was reared, was not a good place in the seventies. Sectarian violence, paramilitary murders, terrorist bombings. The best and brightest left the province, including Kane's older brother and sister. At medical school in his early twenties, the gauche and immature student discovered a new and different way of life. The university buzzed with challenge, distrust of authority and rejection of tradition. Tempers flared as opposing beliefs in politics and religion collided. Amidst this uncertainty, Kane found his own doubts. The boy who'd recited chunks of scripture and sung hymns on Sundays was ill at ease in this grown-up world. And he raged as he realised how much he'd lost out on, the downside of an oppressive religious upbringing.

Then he challenged his father's drinking and his mother's unquestioning beliefs. He started arguments where before he'd rarely held an opinion. As his university years progressed, his serious face and demeanour gave way to an impish smile and roguish swagger. He discovered he had a wicked sense of humour. Unlike his father, whose sermons often left congregations quaking, Kane knew how to make his friends laugh. Encouraged, he embraced a more laid-back, God-free lifestyle. He realised the simple enjoyment of a beer with friends. And

intimacies with young women. But he didn't find romance easy. Clumsy and awkward in female company, he could fall hopelessly in love on a Monday, only to walk away by the end of the week. Many young women left him. 'You're too intense, Jakob. Lighten up.'

Then he discovered his dark side. He was an all-or-nothing man. Drank to get drunk. A kiss meant nothing unless it led to bed. In Australia, he roved from party to pub, from pub to party, one girlfriend to the next. He argued angrily, even over trivial subjects. 'Whatever's bothering you, sort it out,' Fred Hudson's wife snapped after their final bedroom tryst. 'You're wasting the best years of your life.'

It was around then that Kane came to terms with his discontent. He realised, and silently accepted, that he was rudderless and without ambition. He had no clear career path, content to drift from one part-time job to the next. When a phone call warned of his mother's worsening dementia, he returned to Ireland. There, shocked at her decline and annoyed by his father's drinking, he quit home and city, determined to establish his own medical practice. But he needed money. Which was why Bob Welford's offer of eight thousand pounds in four weeks was too good to pass up.



When he left the following week – on Tuesday 7th April 1987 – Kane was offered a handwritten page explaining where Dr James Killan's house was located ('I've arranged for you to stay there'). Telephone numbers ('one for personal calls, the other for patients'). Instructions on heating, etc. Keys to the front door with separate keys to his surgery. Killan's

housekeeper, Imelda Speers, had agreed to look after him, so he was guaranteed a hot dinner.

Killan's pet dog ('some sort of half breed') was in kennels.

'I put the word about that there's a very experienced locum doctor on the way,' said Welford as he handed Kane a road map with the route outlined. 'I expect you'll be run off your feet so get a good night's sleep and start work tomorrow.'



Dublin to Cloughermar in north Cavan took over four hours. Some good, wide and straight roads. Some decent roads with dangerous bends. Some narrow country roads with overgrown hedgerows. He stopped at a chipper for a burger and fries, and flirted with the waitress for the hell of it. Then on the road again, driving back lanes and side lanes. Checking signposts. With the window down, he tried to make sense of vague directions from locals.

Eventually, as daylight faded, Kane pulled into the driveway of Dr James Killan's red-brick house a mile outside Cloughermar village – 'built by his wealthy father to impress,' according to Bob Welford. The property was two-storey with a generous porch set in the middle of a half-acre of land. Gravel driveway to the road, gravel frontage. Overgrown lawn front and back with flower beds that needed weeding. Fire-engine-red solid wood front door. Bay windows on the ground and first floors. Back door painted black. Slate roof with two chimneys. Separately, a stand-alone red-brick garage with wooden doors secured with a sliding bolt. In the back garden, there was a specially constructed bird feeder. Then an empty dog kennel with empty water bowl.

It was indeed a significant and imposing house, and Kane liked the idea of having it all to himself. As he circled the grounds, he deliberated on his own situation.

I have four weeks to clear my head and put Australia behind me.
Four weeks to do some good work and get paid handsomely for it.
Four weeks to rebuild my reputation.
Four weeks to plan for the future.
Four weeks to just be me.