

Borderlands

Brian McGilloway

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Angela Cashell

Chapter One

Saturday, 21st December 2002

It was not beyond reason that Angela Cashell's final resting place should straddle the border. Presumably, neither those who dumped her corpse, nor, indeed, those who had created the border between the North and South of Ireland in 1920, could understand the vagaries that meant that her body lay half in one country and half in another, in an area known as the borderlands.

The peculiarities of the Irish border are famous. Eighty years ago it was drawn through fields, farms and rivers by civil servants who knew little more about the area than that which they'd learnt from a map. Now, people live with the consequences, owning houses where TV licences are bought in the North and the electricity needed to run them is paid for in the South.

When a crime occurs in an area not clearly in one jurisdiction or another, the Irish Republic's An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland work together, each

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offering all the practical help and advice they can, the lead detective determined generally by either the location of the body or the nationality of the victim.

Consequently then, I stood with my colleagues from An Garda facing our northern counterparts through the snow-heavy wind which came running up the river. The sky above us, bruised purple and yellow in the dying sun, promised no reprieve.

We shook hands, exchanged greetings and moved to where the girl lay, prone but for one hand, which was turned towards the sky. The medical examiner, a local doctor named John Mulrooney, was kneeling beside the girl's naked body, testing her muscles for signs of rigor mortis. Her head rested at his knees. Her hair was blonde at the ends, but honey-coloured closer to her scalp, her skin white and clean except for thin scratches across her back and legs caused by the brambles through which her body had fallen. A Scene of Crime Officer leaned in close to her, examining the cuts as the medical examiner pointed them out, and took photographs.

We watched as three or four Gardai moved in to help turn her over. I stepped back and stared across the water to the northern side, where the arthritic limbs of the trees stretched towards the snow clouds, the black branches rattling in the winter wind.

'Do you recognize her, sir?' one of the northerners asked, and I turned back to the girl, whose face was now exposed. My vision blurred momentarily as a breeze shivered across the

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river's surface. Then my sight cleared and I moved over and knelt beside her, suppressing the urge to take off my jacket and cover her with it, at least until the SOCOs were finished.

'That's Johnny Cashell's girl,' a uniformed Garda said, 'from Clipton Place.'

I nodded my agreement. 'He's right,' I said, turning to the northern Inspector, a man called Jim Hendry, whose rank was the same as mine but whose experience was vastly greater. 'She's ours, I'm afraid.'

He nodded without looking at me. Hendry was at least a head taller than me, well over six feet, with a wiry frame and dirty, fair hair. He sported a thin, sandy moustache at which he tugged when under stress; he did so now. 'Poor girl,' he said.

Her face was fresh and young; she was fifteen or sixteen at most. She wore make-up in a way that reminded me of my own daughter, Penny, when she played at being a grown-up with my wife's cosmetics. The blue eye-shadow was too heavily applied, contrasting with the redness of her eyes where the veins had burst in her final moments. Her whole face had assumed a light-blue hue. Her mouth was partially opened in a rictus of pain; the bright red lipstick she had so carefully applied was smeared across her face in streaks.

Her small breasts carried purple bruises the size and shape of a man's hands. One bruise, smaller and darker than the others, resembled a love bite. Snowflakes settled on her body as gently as kisses and did not melt.

Her trunk and thighs were ivory white, though her arms

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and the lower parts of her legs were tanned with cosmetics, the streaks and misapplication clear now against her pallor. A pinkish colour was forming on her legs and chest. She wore plain white cotton pants which were inside out.

'Well, Doc?' I asked the ME, 'What do you think?'

He stood up and peeled off the rubber gloves he had been wearing. Then he stepped away from the body and took a cigarette offered to him by a Garda officer. 'Hard to say. The body is fairly stiff, but it was a cold night so I can't really give you time of death. More than six hours, no more than twelve. You'll know better when the autopsy's done. Cause of death - I can't be totally sure of that either, but I'd say the bruising on her chest is significant. That blue tinting of the face is caused by smothering or crushing of the chest. That, and the chest bruising, would suggest suffocation, but that's an educated guess. Lividity indicates she was moved after she died, though you hardly need me to tell you that. Naked women don't just appear in the middle of fields.'

'Signs of struggle?' Hendry asked.

'Signs of something. Her fingernails are bitten so close I doubt you'll get anything from under them. Sorry I can't be more help, Ben,' he said to me. 'I can tell you that she's dead, and that someone killed her and dumped her here, so it's over to you now. The state pathologist will be here as soon as possible.'

'Presumably this was sexual,' I said.

'Don't know for sure. The pathologist will take swabs as a

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matter of course. Personally, I'd say fairly likely. Good luck, Ben. Take it easy.' With that he dropped the gloves into his case, lifted it and walked up the embankment to his car, barely looking at the body as he passed it.

I looked again at the girl. Her hands rested on the leaves beneath her, the bright red nail polish a little incongruous on fingers so small and on nails bitten so near to the quick. There was a little dirt around her nails, and soon enough a SOCO wrapped her hands in plastic bags which he secured at her wrist. I noticed that, on her right hand, she wore a gold ring set with some type of stone. It looked too old-fashioned for a girl of her age; a family heirloom, a gift from a parent or grandparent, perhaps. The stone was tinted green, like a moonstone, and surrounded by diamonds. I asked the photographer to take a shot of it. As he did so, the flash illuminated an engraving on the band.

'Looks like something's written on it, sir,' he said, crouching right down and holding the camera in one hand as he angled her hand slightly with his other. Then he focused the camera tight on the ring. 'I think it says AC, sir: her initials.'

I nodded for no particular reason and turned again to the group of northerners.

'Shitty enough one to get the week before Christmas, Devlin. Good luck to you,' Hendry said, nipping off the end of his cigarette, then putting the butt in his pocket so as not to contaminate the crime scene. That was a bit of a joke. Our resources in the arse-end of Donegal are hardly FBI quality

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and, besides a dozen or so policemen and the waiting ambulance crew and the group of poachers who had discovered the body, God only knew how many other people had tramped back and forth past the body and along the roadway where those who dumped it must have stopped.

We would look for distinctive tyre treads, footprints, and so on, and try to find whatever forensics we could, but the spot where this body had been abandoned, though secluded, was only a few hundred yards behind the local Cineplex. On weekend nights this whole stretch of lane was lined with cars, each respecting the other's space, obeying an unspoken rule of privacy to which I had myself subscribed when younger, when I was finally allowed to take my father's car to collect my girlfriend. The makes of cars had changed since then – and I tell myself, in moments of righteous indignation (though I accept that it's probably not true), that the kind of activities in which the couples engage has probably changed too. However, the place remained the same – as dark and furtive as any of the clumsy embraces which take place on back seats there at night. Indeed, it was possible that Angela Cashell had met her death in such a car.

'They might have been from your side,' I said to Hendry, motioning towards the top of the embankment, where those who had left her must have stood.

'They possibly are,' he agreed, 'but this one's yours. This must be your first murder since—'

'1883,' replied one of ours. 'And he was hung!'

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'Rightly bloody so,' agreed another northerner.

'Oh, there's been more since,' I said. 'We just haven't found all the bodies yet.'

Hendry laughed. 'We'll help any way we can, Devlin, but you're the lead on this.' He looked at Angela one last time. 'She was a lovely-looking girl. I'd hate to have to tell her parents.'

'Jesus, don't talk,' I replied. 'You don't know her father, Johnny Cashell.'

'Oh, I know enough,' Hendry replied darkly and winked. 'British Intelligence isn't totally down the drain yet.' With that, we shook hands and he walked off towards his own side, steadying himself against the thick buffets of air carrying the smell of the water across the borderlands.

Johnny Cashell was known to all the Gardai in Lifford on a first-name basis, having spent many nights in the holding cell of the small police station in the centre of our village. In fact, when the county council recently gave the whole village a facelift, putting new lamps and hanging-baskets all around the cobbled square and benches along the main roads, we named the bench outside the station 'Sadie's', in recognition of the amount of time spent on it by Cashell's wife while she waited for him to be released in the morning from the drunk-tank.

Johnny Cashell was an obdurate man with a chip against anyone better educated than himself. He would hold court in the local bars, boasting of all he had achieved despite having left

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school at fourteen. In reality, he was a petty criminal, stealing from phone boxes and charity tins, and pissing it against the wall of the Military Post as he staggered past on his way home.

No matter how low Johnny sank, Sadie was always waiting for him, even when he stole his mother-in-law's pension book. However, we all had to reconsider Sadie's loyalty to Johnny when he got out after serving nine months for that. Three months later she gave birth to a baby girl, the only member of the Cashell family who didn't have Johnny's bright copper colouring but a head washed in wisps of white-blonde. They called the girl Angela, and Johnny cared for her as if she were his own, as far as anyone knew never questioning her parentage. We all suspected that secretly it hurt him – the bright blonde so obviously at odds with the fiery reds of her siblings. In weaker moments, when Johnny shouted profanities from the holding cells until we couldn't take it any more, we taunted him about his blonde-haired daughter and how she was the prettiest of the bunch. The slightest comment was enough to silence him and ensure a full night's sleep for whoever was stuck on duty because of him.

The snow ceased as the assistant state pathologist arrived, black medical bag in hand. I stood by the river as she worked, wondering what to say to Johnny Cashell, and watched the sun exploding low over the horizon, turning the ribs of the clouds first pink, then purple and orange.

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Cashell was a barrel-chested, red-faced man with thick, curly red hair that he kept tied back in a ponytail. He dressed as if from a charity shop and his clothes had a musty, damp odour. He was more particular about his feet, and I never met him wearing the same pair of trainers twice: they were always new and always a brand label. When you spoke to him he looked at the ground, scrunching up his toes so you could see the movements through the white leather of his shoes. When he spoke it was not to your face but to a spot just to the left, as though someone else waited at your shoulder for his words. All his children had developed the same habit, which their social worker had thought of as rude until she got to know them.

As we stood at his doorway, he stared at his shoes while I told him of his daughter's death and invited him to identify her. Then he looked past me, his eyes flickering with grief or anger. He exhaled a breath which he seemed to have been holding since I arrived, and I thought I could smell drink under the cigarette smoke.

'It's her,' he said. 'I know it's her. Sh'ain't been home these two days. Went out to Strabane on Thursday.' He leaned back a little, as though steadying himself against the door jamb, the sunlight burnishing to gold the red curls on the back of his hands.

Sadie Cashell appeared behind him, face ashen, seemingly having overheard our conversation. She was drying her hands on a dishcloth. 'What is it, Johnny?' she asked with suspicion.

'They've gone and found Angela. They think she's dead,

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Ma!' he said. And with that his lips softened and his face crumpled.

He spluttered rather than cried, spit and tears dribbling down his chin. His eyes stopped flickering as the final rays of sunlight stole from the sky and the world darkened almost imperceptibly.

'How?' Sadie demanded, her jaw muscles quivering.

'We . . . we don't know yet, Sadie,' I said. 'We think someone has killed her, I'm afraid.'

'There's been some mistake,' she said, her voice rising hysterically, her grip tightening on her husband's arm until her knuckles whitened. 'You're wrong.'

'I'm sorry, Sadie,' I said. 'I'll . . . we'll do what we can. I promise.' She stared at me, as if waiting for me to say something else, then turned and went inside.

Johnny Cashell snuffed through his nose, his face turned towards Strabane. I guessed that Sadie had broken the news to their children, for I could hear the cries of girls begin from inside the house, the sound building quickly to a crescendo.

'We need you to come to the morgue, Mr Cashell. To identify her. If you don't mind.'

'She needn't be there now. Bring her home,' he said.

'Mr Cashell, we have things we have to do, sir, to find out what happened to her. You mightn't get her back for a day or two, I'm afraid.'

He took a tin from his pocket and removed a rolled cigarette from it, put it in his mouth and lit it. Then he spat a piece of

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tobacco from his tongue and looked once more in my direction, just beyond my shoulder. 'I know what happened to her. I'll deal with it,' he said.

'What do you mean? What do you think happened, Mr Cashell?' I asked.

'Never mind,' he said, still not looking at me.

His wife reappeared at the door. 'Where's my girl, John?' she asked her husband. He pointed to me with his thumb.

'He says we can't have her yet. She ain't ready to come home, he says.'

'Who did it?' she demanded.

'I . . . we don't know, Mrs Cashell,' I said, glancing at her husband. 'We're working on it.'

'You're fast enough to pick up on innocent people in the street, maybe has a drink. Now you're slow all of a sudden. Some rich girl, you'd be faster, I'd say.'

'Mrs Cashell,' I said, 'I promise we will deal with this as quickly as possible. Can I speak with your other daughters, please?'

Sadie looked first at me, then at her husband, who shrugged his shoulders and walked away from the door, still smoking. Then she allowed me in.

Angela's three sisters were seated around a table in the kitchen. They looked remarkably similar. A baby, dressed only in a nappy,

clung to the chest of one of them, bunching up her white blouse in his fist.

I sat at the table and took out my cigarettes.

'No smoking around my wee'un,' said the young mother, tapping her own cigarette ash onto the linoleum floor.

I did not put the cigarette away, nor did I light it. The youngest daughter was still crying, but the other girls stared at me, one red-eyed, one vaguely defiant, as if unwilling to show emotions in front of a Guard.

'I need some help in finding out what happened to Angela,' I said. 'Perhaps you could tell me people she was with, boy-friends, that sort of thing.'

The youngest girl opened her mouth as though to speak but was interrupted by the one holding the baby, whose name I seemed to remember was Christine.

'We don't know nothing, *Inspector*.' She pronounced each syllable of the title deliberately and with as much disdain as she could muster. I noticed that she alone, of all the sisters, had not cried since she had heard the news. Her eyes were clear and white. Aware of my gaze, she looked down at her baby instead, her head tilted slightly to one side.

I turned to the youngest girl. 'Were you going to tell me something?' I said. 'To help me?'

She glanced furtively at her sister, then lowered her head and stared at her hands, which were joined in her lap. She looked undernourished, her bony pink hands like baby birds in a nest.

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Christine spoke again. 'Like I already told you', she said, 'we don't know nothing.' With that, she lifted her baby's bottle and began to feed him, holding the cigarette in her mouth and squinting through the smoke.

I asked Sadie if I could see Angela's room. She led me up the stairs in silence, pushed open one of the bedroom doors and waited for me to go in. I was a little surprised to find the room so tidy, and at the same time a little ashamed at the unworthiness of the thought. A window dominated the far wall, facing onto the backyard.

The room looked freshly painted, a lavender tint; the carpet and bed linen were light green. A poster of someone called Orlando Bloom had been tacked carefully to the wall behind the bed. The wardrobe was packed with clothes, neatly arranged and hung according to type and size. I spotted the corner of a paperback on the floor, peeping out from the overhanging bedspread. I recognized the author as one whom my wife Debbie read. Flicking through the pages absentmindedly as I looked around the room, I noticed that Angela had been using a strip of passport photographs as a bookmark. The strip showed the half-faces of two girls, grinning in from the white border on either side. One of them was Angela. In the final picture their faces touched lightly and Angela was no longer smiling, yet seemed all the more content. It saddened me to see her so alive. I held the pictures up to Sadie and asked her who the other girl was, but she simply shrugged her shoulders and asked if I was finished. I replaced the strip of pictures,

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careful not to lose the page, before I realized the futility of the gesture.

In the corner of the room there was an old CD player and a plastic rack with a dozen or so discs sitting under a free-standing mirror. Most of the bands I either did not know or had heard of only from Penny. Strangely, I noticed in the middle a CD by the Divine Comedy, whom I had seen perform in Dublin a few years previously. It seemed a little incongruous among all the boy bands. I asked Sadie about the CD. Again she shrugged and moved into the hallway, making it clear that she did not wish for me to remain in her daughter's bedroom. I thanked her and offered my condolences again as I made my way downstairs and outside to arrange for Johnny Cashell to identify the body.

He was still standing in his front yard when I left the house, picking the last remaining deadheads off a floribunda rose bush. The heads themselves were heavy and brown, hanging low. He broke them off with his hand, claspings fists full of dead petals.

'I am sorry, Mr Cashell.' I said, shaking his free hand. 'There is one other thing. Can you tell me what Angela was wearing when last you saw her?'

'Jeans, probably. A blue hooded thing her ma bought her for her birthday, I think. 'Twere only last month. Why? Don't you know what she's wearing?'

As a father myself, I could not deprive him of his assumption that his daughter had retained some vestige of dignity in

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death. I opened my mouth to speak, but the air between us was brittle and sharp with the scent of decaying leaves and I could think of nothing adequate to say.

When I returned to the station, Burgess, our Desk Sergeant, told me that I was wanted immediately by the Superintendent. Costello – or Elvis to everyone who spoke of him (though not to his face) – was famous in Lifford, having served here, in and out of uniform, for almost thirty years. It was suspected that he knew many of the family secrets that most people preferred to keep buried. It meant that, in the village, he was universally admired but secretly mistrusted. However, he never knowingly used the information he had gathered unless absolutely necessary, and he excused many ancient crimes on the grounds that if they had not merited punishment at the time, how could they do so now? By rights he should have been stationed in Letterkenny, which is the centre of the Donegal division, but following his wife Emily's mastectomy several years earlier, he had requested and been granted permission to use Lifford as his headquarters.

His nickname came not only from his surname, but also his Christian name, Olly; more than once, Gardai called to public-order disturbances had been greeted with a drunken chorus of 'Oliver's Army', despite the fact that his name was actually Alphonsus. The name stuck to the force in Lifford in much the same way that Elvis stuck with Costello. He never

said it, but I think he was secretly pleased by the nickname, taking it as a tacit sign of affection, recognition of his position as an institution of sorts.

'Cashell is a Cork man,' he said now, straightening his tie in the mirror hung behind his office door. His position meant that he was the only person in the station to have his own office, while the rest of us shared rooms. In fairness, Elvis had been careful not to rub our faces in his perks: the furnishing was perfunctory, not expensive.

'Really?' I asked, unsure of his point.

'Yes. Moved here when he was three. A lot of us suspected at the time that they were travellers, but his family rented out towards St Johnston. He got placed in Clijpton Place after he got Sadie pregnant the first time. Didn't fit in too well to begin with.'

'Apparently not,' I said. 'Drove the neighbours on one side out with the noise, drove the neighbours on the other side out with a claw hammer.'

'For which he was cautioned. Still, this is a terrible thing to happen. How did he take it?'

'As you would expect. He seemed shattered. I thought one of the daughters was going to tell me something, but the rest of the family closed tight.'

'Years of mistrust, Benedict, learnt at the dinner table.' Costello is also the only person I know who refers to me by my full Christian name, as if it would be unmannerly of him to do otherwise. 'Leave them a day or two and try again. Maybe when

fewer of them are about.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Have you a jacket?' he asked, nodding at the informality of my jeans and jumper – one of the few perks of being a Detective.

'Not with me.'

'Nip home and get changed. You're doing a press conference at five. RTE'll be here, and the northern stations, so look sharp.' I had reached the door when he added, 'They haven't found her clothes yet, Benedict. I've requested the Water Unit to search the river in the morning. The PSNI have said they'll help. It'll be an early start.'

The press conference was the first that I had done and, while probably quite low-key in comparison with other such events, it was daunting to face the banks of lights, cameras and microphones. Costello read a prepared statement, then invited questions. My role, I had been told, was to sit there so he could identify me for the cameras. That way, justice would not be faceless, he said, without a hint of irony. I was also to handle any operational questions which Costello couldn't answer, though I was told not to go into specifics. It was strange hearing our voices echo back at us with a slight delay, almost mocking the fact that, despite all that we said to reassure the public, we had no idea who had killed Angela Cashell, how she had been killed

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or, more worryingly, why someone would kill a fifteen-year-old girl and dump her naked body on a river bank.

Penny and Shane were granted a maternal dispensation to stay up past bedtime to watch Daddy on TV. They almost fell asleep, though, during the main report, which was on the US President's announcement that 50,000 troops were to be sent to supplement the 60,000 already stationed in the Middle East.

When the brief article on the Cashell murder was finally aired, it was sandwiched between a report on the rising price of housing and a story about a drug trafficker who had been murdered in Dublin. The newscasters expressed more sincere concern about the house prices than the death of the unnamed dealer.

As I placed Shane in his cot, I heard a knock on the door, and a few seconds later the sound of Debbie inviting a visitor in. I peered out through our bedroom window and saw our neighbour Mark Anderson's pick-up truck parked in the driveway. Mark actually lived over half a mile away, but he owned all the land bordering our house, fields in which he grazed his sheep and cattle. He was an odd, socially awkward man, and I was surprised to see him. The only time he had called on us before was to appeal for leniency after I arrested his son, Malachy, who had been caught peeping in Sharon Kennedy's bedroom window from the tree outside her house. Her husband had felled the tree that same evening.

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When I came back downstairs Anderson was sitting in the living room, perched so close to the edge of the sofa he looked as though he would fall off. He stood up when I came in and I smiled and extended my hand. 'Happy Christmas, Mark,' I said. 'Good to see you.'

He did not reciprocate my smile or greeting but said simply, 'Your dog's been annoying my sheep.'

'Excuse me,' I said, moving over to where Debbie was sitting.

'Your dog's been worrying my sheep. I saw it.'

Our dog is a six-year-old basset-hound called Frank, which I bought for Debbie on our fifth wedding anniversary when it seemed we could not have children. Four months after we bought him, Debbie found out she was pregnant with Penny, and so Frank became very much my dog. Now that Penny was older, she too had become attached to him. At night we kept him locked in a shed we built for him, and I told Anderson as much.

'I know what I seen,' he said. 'Anything happens to any of my sheep, I'll put a bullet in the mutt. I've warned you.'

Penny, who had stopped watching the TV at the start of the conversation, now stared up at Anderson open-mouthed and panic-stricken.

'There's no need for threats, Mark. Frank's a good dog and I don't think he'd be annoying your sheep. I'm sure you're mistaken, but we'll keep an extra careful eye on him.' I winked at

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Penny conspiratorially. She tried to smile back, but did so without confidence.

'Well, don't say I didn't warn you. If that dog's in my field, I'll kill it,' he repeated, then nodded, as though we had had a conversation about the weather, and bade us a happy Christmas.

When he left, Penny sidled over to me and tugged on my trouser leg. 'Is he gonna hurt Frank, Daddy?' Her voice cracked as she spoke and her eyes reddened.

'No, sweetie,' Debbie said, and came over and lifted her in her arms. 'Daddy'll make sure that Frank stays inside every night, then nothing will happen to him. Isn't that right, Daddy?' she said, looking at me while hugging Penny into her and swaying lightly from side to side.

'That's right, sweetheart,' I said. 'Frank will be alright.'