

Gallows Lane

Brian McGilloway

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Extract

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And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word!

From 'Porphyria's Lover', Robert Browning

Chapter One

Sunday, 28 May

James Kerr returned to Lifford on a blustery morning in May, shuffling under the heavy clouds that scudded across the sky towards the North. The air had thickened all week, building to an overnight thunderstorm, the tail-end of which now spread itself across the Donegal border into Tyrone.

As Kerr passed the border service station from Strabane, he struggled to control the multicoloured golfing umbrella he carried, which the wind had snapped inside out, cracking the thin metal spokes like a bird's broken wings.

A carload of teenagers from the North sped past him, steering deliberately through the widening puddle at the roadside at just the right moment for the spray to hit Kerr, instantly darkening his trousers, the water in the car's wake misting in an iridescent arc. Perhaps the thudding of the wind popping the material of the umbrella drowned out the sound of laughter from the speeding car, but it could not disguise the hand gestures the occupants made from the rear window. They must

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have seen me then, sitting at the border in a Garda car, for they slowed down and fumbled to put on their seat belts. I radioed for someone to keep an eye out for them, then lit a cigarette and waited for Kerr to reach my car.

I had never met Kerr before, though I recognized him from the mug shot I had been given by my superintendent, Olly 'Elvis' Costello. The photograph had been taken a decade earlier, when Kerr was really just a boy. His hair had been thick and curly, the fringe hanging over his eyes, resting on the frame of the penny glasses he had worn. He had attempted a sneer for the camera, but it was clear from his eyes that he was terrified. His face was puffy with lack of sleep, his pupils were wide, the whites yellowed – with exhaustion, presumably. His skin was clear, without a hint of the stubble or beard growth one associates with arrest photographs.

I turned my attention from the picture, which I had tucked inside the sun visor, to the man himself drawing alongside my car. Since the picture had been taken he had lost weight. His hair had been shaved tightly, revealing an oddly shaped skull. He still wore glasses though they were dappled with rain and I could see him squinting past them towards the car. I rolled down the window as he drew abreast.

'James Kerr?' He nodded, but did not speak. 'Welcome home. Can I give you a ride someplace?'

'No, thank you,' he said, as his umbrella thudded inside out once again.

'Get in the car, James,' I said, starting the engine.

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He paused, as if considering the offer, glancing up and down the road. Finally, he opened the back door of the car and flung his blue canvas bag on to the seat. He straightened out his umbrella and laid it on the floor as if not to wet the upholstery, then he closed the door and got into the front passenger seat.

'I'd rather not sit in the *back* of a police car again for a while,' he explained, removing his glasses which had begun to steam up.

'Whatever you like, James. My name's DI Devlin. I don't believe we've met.' I extended my hand to shake his but he had begun to wipe the rain off his face. He ran a hand over his scalp as if to slick back his hair, then he flicked the gathered moisture onto the floor of the car. Smiling apologetically, he wiped his hand on his trouser leg and shook mine, weakly.

As he was sitting up front, I could smell the dirt of his unwashed clothes and the staleness of his breath. His jeans had been pale blue at one stage but were badly stained now and darkened where the rain and puddle water had soaked them. He wore a yellow skinny-rib T-shirt under a grey woollen cardigan. I could tell from the smell that he hadn't been drinking at least, which was unusual for a man who had just been released from prison. But then, James Kerr was an unusual character.

Kerr had been involved with the local Gardai most of his life. When he hit adolescence he was fairly regularly lifted for some

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petty disturbance: stealing sweets, then cigarettes; breaking windows; letting down tyres. Anything to get himself noticed, I suppose. He had a reputation for mouthing off when questioned and, on one occasion, he spat in the face of an officer called to a local shop where he had been caught trying to steal a woman's weekly magazine, of all things.

The situation reached a low for James when he took a shine to a neighbour's seventeen-year-old daughter, Mary Gallagher. Their blossoming relationship seemed to keep James on the straight and narrow right up until the day, just a week shy of his sixteenth birthday, when he discovered that Mary was his half-sister, the product of one of his father's clandestine affairs. Things became further complicated when it transpired that Mary was pregnant with James's child and, in the manner of parochial Irish towns countrywide, the girl was sent to live with an aunt in England and James became the wandering protagonist in his own personal Greek tragedy.

Kerr's mother, having broken free from her husband, then started an affair with a teacher from Strabane, whose son was at school with James. James graduated from stealing sweets to sniffing glue and joyriding cars along the back roads between the North and South. Eventually he wrapped one of his stolen cars around an oak tree on the back road to Clady and broke his wrist. He was banned from driving for ten years and, had he possessed a licence, it would have been revoked. He should have been fined but, as his barrister argued impecuniosity,

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James was given community service instead and had to tend the flower beds around Lifford for three months.

Finally, Kerr had been more seriously injured fleeing the scene of an armed robbery just over the border and had been arrested by the RUC, the law in the North before the Police Service of Northern Ireland was established. He had served almost eight years of a twelve-year sentence before allegedly finding God and, the Friday previous to my meeting him, had been freed early for good behaviour.

All of this Superintendent Costello had explained to me that Sunday morning in his office. Costello had received word from the PSNI that Kerr had been released from Maghaberry Prison. Since then, Costello had posted someone on the border waiting for Kerr to appear – which he finally did.

‘I don’t want Kerr coming back here, making trouble, Benedict. If he arrives, convince him to stay back on the Northern side of the border, eh?’

‘What’s he done?’ I asked.

‘Found Jesus apparently; that’s why they let the wee shite out.’

‘Maybe he has,’ I suggested.

‘What?’

‘Found Jesus.’

‘I doubt it,’ Costello said. ‘If Jesus knew Kerr was looking for Him, He would’ve hid. Kerr’s bad news, Benedict.’

And then he’d explained the background of the case to me. Protesting his innocence throughout his trial and subsequent

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incarceration, Kerr told his parole board that the first thing he would do upon release was to atone for his past sins, through reconciliation, as the Bible had taught him.

Listening to Costello describe it, I could understand why he didn't want him on our side of the border. Chances were he was lying, which made him the kind of trouble we just didn't need.

'So, do all ex-cons get this reception, Inspector, or is it just for me?' Kerr said, holding his purpled hands in front of the hot-air blower, which I assumed to be a request for heat. I obliged, while pressing the in-car cigarette lighter.

'Isn't that illegal here, or something?' Kerr asked, gesturing towards my cigarette.

'Yep,' I said. In fact, in the Republic it's almost impossible to smoke anywhere. For some time now it has been illegal to smoke in a place of employment. If you want a cigarette after dinner in a restaurant you have to go out and stand on the street, usually with the chef who prepared your meal. A Garda car is considered a place of work, but then who was going to arrest me? I lit up and blew the smoke out of the window, away from my passenger.

'I see you're travelling light. Just home for a visit, Mr Kerr?' I asked.

'Is that a question or a suggestion?'

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'Just making conversation, actually,' I said, my hands raised in mock surrender. 'Have you any family left in Lifford?'

Kerr smirked. 'I'm guessing that you know I haven't. Is there any particular reason for the welcoming committee?'

'We're just concerned, James – for your safety and for others'.'

'I'm not going to hurt anyone. I need to see somebody.'

'Anyone in particular?'

'Yes,' he replied, then turned down the heat and put his hands in his cardigan pockets. 'Are we going anywhere in particular, or are we just going to sit here?'

'Where can I leave you, Mr Kerr?' I asked, starting the car.

'There's a B&B out at Porthall.'

'I know it.'

'That would be great.'

While we drove we spoke about a number of things to do with the area. Kerr commented on how much had changed since he had left and expressed distaste at the design of some of the newer buildings.

When we arrived at the B&B, he reached back for his bag and umbrella, then turned to face me.

'Don't worry about me, Inspector. I won't cause any trouble. I need to get something off my chest, something my reverend says I need to do. Then I'll be out of here. No one needs to fear me any more.'

'Does this something involve either robbery or revenge?' I asked.

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'Neither. I'm not going to hurt anyone, Inspector. I promise you.'

'I'll have to take your word for it,' I said. 'Please don't make me regret it.'

'Thanks for the lift. God bless you.' With that, he got out, slammed the door and pushed through the wind up the driveway of the B&B where, he had told me, he was booked for the week.

As I cleared my stuff out of the car later, and tried to air out the smell of smoke, I found a religious tract which Kerr had left in the compartment on the passenger side door, entitled 'Turn from Sin and Trust in Me'. Stamped on the back was the name and address of a Reverend Charles Bardwell from Coleraine. I almost crumpled the sheet up, then reconsidered and left it where it was, lest its message should be of some interest to the car's next occupant.

That evening, Debbie took the children to see her parents and I was left behind to wash Frank, our one-eared basset hound.

I had just finished towelling Frank dry when Costello phoned. Ostensibly he was checking how things had gone with Kerr.

'Did he say what he wants here?'

'I get the impression he's looking for some kind of catharsis, you know. I'm not wholly sure, to be honest.'

'Bullshit, Benedict. I've known Kerr since he was a wee'un.

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His father came to us once complaining that someone was breaking the windows in his glasshouse. Went on for months, a pane of glass every night or two. Turned out it was Kerr himself, ticked off at his old man for not buying him some toy or other. He was nine then. Take my word for it, he's bad news. Keep an eye on him.'

'Yes, sir, I will,' I said.

'Just best we keep an eye, Benedict.' I could hear his stubbled chin rasp across the receiver, his breath fuzzing on the line. 'How's the family?'

'Fine, sir.'

'Good, good to hear. Very good.'

He seemed to be forcing good humour but I could sense from the vagueness of his questions and comments that he had something deeper troubling him.

'Is everything all right, sir?'

'Fine, Benedict.' He paused and something hung between us like the static before a lightning storm.

Finally he continued. 'I . . . I handed in my notice today, Benedict.'

While we had all suspected that Costello would retire in the near future, most of us believed he'd see it through to his sixtieth next year.

'Jesus, sir. I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, assuming from his tone of voice that 'Congratulations' was not appropriate.

'Effective from the end of June,' he said, as if I had not spoken.

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'Why?' I asked. 'I mean, why so soon, sir? Wouldn't you hold on for another year?'

'My heart's not in it any more, Benedict,' he said. 'Not since the business with Emily.'

Costello's wife had been murdered a few years ago during a spate of killings linked with the disappearance in the 1970s of a prostitute with whom Costello had been having an affair. 'I understand, sir,' I said.

'I've told the kids, you know. They think it's for the best.'

'Any plans, sir? Taking up fishing, maybe?' I attempted levity, but without reciprocation.

'They're compiling the promotions list for a few new Supers for the region, I believe,' he said. 'In fact, they'll be interviewing by the middle of next month, so . . .'

I had an inkling where this was going. 'So?'

'Make sure your cap's in the ring, Benedict,' he said.

'I hadn't really thought about it, sir,' I said, almost truthfully.

'Well, think about it now,' he replied sternly.

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'Thank you – I will.'

Although he did not speak, I could sense a change in his tone; his breathing lightened a little. Finally he said, 'I wanted to go out on top. I wanted to go out with a success, you know?'

'Okay, sir,' I said.

'Mmm,' he murmured, as if reflecting on an unspoken thought. Then he said, 'See you tomorrow, Benedict,' and the line went dead.

Chapter Two

Monday, 31 May

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Lifford was the Seat of Judicial power in Donegal. Its courthouse, an imposing sandstone building, was built over the local jail and asylum. From its roof, on market days, local criminals were hanged while crowds of up to 12,000 people gathered below, cheering as the cattle thieves and others jerked and struggled like fish fifty feet above them, their feet grappling for purchase against the courthouse walls, their backs arched as they tried to free themselves from the chains that bound their arms behind them.

In even earlier times, the accused were hanged from the lower boughs of one of three giant chestnut trees, near Dardnells, just outside the main village. The site has been built on now, a sprawling housing estate which has spread steadily outwards towards Raphoe, but the lane along which the condemned were led – Gallows Lane – still exists. The local kids believe it is haunted. They still claim, in an age when such

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beliefs are largely forgotten, that on a Halloween night the chains of the condemned can be heard rattling and, if you listen closely enough, you can hear the wails of the accused and the creaking of the long-dead branches.

It was along Gallows Lane that, at eight-forty-five the following morning, two officers on routine patrol had noticed someone lurking at the tree line close to the local nursery school. They pursued the figure, but lost him in a copse on land belonging to Peter Webb, an Englishman who lectured in the College of Further Education in Strabane. Upon examining the area, the two officers found a parcel wrapped in coal sacks, which contained several hundred rounds of ammunition, three handguns, two shotguns and a large luncheon bag of ecstasy tablets and assorted other drugs.

The storm of the previous day had passed and the morning woke to brilliant sunshine and a freshness about the air. The clouds peppered across the light ceramic sky were no more than wisps, the grass in the fields stretching into Tyrone a deep, lush green, some thick with rapeseed. From the height of Gallows Lane the river below glimmered in the sunlight.

By the time I got to the scene, a cordon had been placed around the area for a quarter-mile radius and every local officer was on site. Costello was standing speaking to the two officers who had made the find, dressed in a navy suit, a camel coloured overcoat folded over one arm. It had not taken him

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long to dress for the cameras. People were gathered around the spot, near the top of Gallows Lane, and, as I walked up it towards the site, I could hardly believe it when I learnt who had made the find.

Harry Patterson and Hugh Colhoun were grinning broadly, caught in the flash of the cameras, holding up some of the weapons found as if in offering. They had reason to smile: in addition to this latest find, just one month earlier the pair had discovered a substantial arms and drugs cache that had made them the toast of the station.

During the Troubles the IRA was known to have kept its arsenal in bunkers along the border. Often these were quite professional affairs: concreted air-raid shelters, perhaps, with steps leading down and electric lights fitted. Usually the entrances were covered with turf or logs or, in the case of a bunker in the middle of a field near Armagh, under a haystack. In that particular case, the British Army had used the field as a landing spot for their Chinook helicopters, dropping and airlifting troops in and out for patrols and house searches, not realizing that the contraband they sought was quite literally under their feet.

In most cases, these bunkers had been sealed up after the Good Friday Agreement seemed to offer the prospect of peace in Northern Ireland. Indeed, when the issue of paramilitary decommissioning became a stumbling block to progress and

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the governments invited General De Chastelain to Northern Ireland to try to encourage the various terrorist groups to 'put their weapons beyond use', the vast majority of the bunkers were filled with concrete, their contents preserved forever like metallic fossils. However, some smaller bunkers were forgotten, their keepers dead, their existence supposedly the stuff of urban myth.

Just occasionally, people stumbled across these bunkers by accident. So it had been in February of this year when Paddy Hannon, a successful land developer who had bought a thirty-acre plot near Raphoe, had begun to excavate the area in preparation for building houses. One of his workers, using an earth-mover to shift tree roots and rocks off the land, had scraped across the top of a bunker, tearing the thick padlock off the rusted iron door which had been buried under a foot of clay and turf.

The man summoned Paddy Hannon, who had gone down into the bunker to investigate, believing he had uncovered an old air-raid shelter. Indeed, even when his torch light raked across a number of weapons lying in one corner, they appeared so rusted he believed them to be Second World War artefacts. Then he discovered bricks of cannabis piled against one wall and called the local Gardai. Patterson and Colhoun duly arrived and could not believe their luck. They called in support and wrote the find up as their own, gaining all the attendant kudos in so doing.

In total the haul had included several pistols and rifles and

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cannabis resin with an estimated street value in excess of three million euros.

Patterson and Colhoun had become heroes, regaling all who would listen with tales of the discovery, neglecting to mention that it had been made long before they arrived on the scene and that, in fact, they had simply babysat the find until the Drugs Squad arrived.

Today's find was altogether more impressive, seeming to have resulted from proper police work.

I knew both men fairly well, having been based in the same station as them for the past few years. Patterson, the more senior of the two, was a little older than I, and, though an inspector, was known to have ambitions to make it higher. He claimed he had chosen to stay in uniform as it brought him closer to the people he had enlisted to serve, but it was common knowledge that he had applied and been turned down by the Detective branch several times; a fact which had caused more than a little animosity between us when I had first arrived at the station as a DI.

He was over six feet tall and around fifteen stone, though his height meant he carried the weight well. His hair had begun to recede quite early and, like many in the same situation, he had elected to shave his head so that only the shadow of his hairline remained. This, combined with his physical size, made him an intimidating figure, and he had the personality to match.

Patterson was a divorcee and a proponent of the shower-room

mentality: he would openly discuss sexual relationships and female colleagues' bodies in the station and had once pinned a centre spread torn from one of his porn magazines on the fridge in our small communal kitchen under the banner 'Stress relief available. Return when finished'. After several of the women in the station complained, he pinned up a picture of a nude male also, under the new title 'Take your pick'. He defended his own chauvinism as mere fun and games and yet became a vocal feminist when in the company of women he found attractive.

His partner, Hugh Colhoun, was a very different creature. He had only joined An Garda in his late thirties and so was still a uniformed officer despite being forty-five years old. He had a wife and three daughters on whom he clearly doted. He supported Patterson in all that he did, to the extent that he would often echo the last few words that his partner spoke in any conversation, in tacit agreement with the sentiments expressed, whether he understood them or not. He was slow and fairly thorough in his job, though he lacked the imagination to take leaps of faith and see beyond the obvious. If I had to guess, I'd say it was Patterson who had suggested searching the area having spotted someone acting suspiciously there. And yet, despite this or indeed because of this, it was Colhoun whom I approached to congratulate.

He blushed while we spoke and looked around him for his partner, who was standing at the corner of the cordon, speaking with Costello and two uniformed constables from Raphoe.

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'It's quite incredible, Hugh. Two finds in two months, nearly.'

'Yes,' Colhoun said, glancing over his shoulder. 'Incredible.'

'You must be looking for detective rank with this work rate.'

He laughed at the joke, then became suddenly serious. 'It was Harry who found them, not me, Ben. He's the one who deserves the credit really, not me.'

'Partners are partners, Hugh; the credit's yours as well.' I shook his hand which was damp and light as air. In a strange way Colhoun seemed almost downbeat about the discovery.

Patterson was not so modest in success, smiling broadly as he approached us.

'Looking for tips, Inspector? This is a turn-up, detectives coming to the uniforms for a hand.' He looked around him as he spoke, trying to encourage others to join in his banter, or perhaps simply to see if he had an audience.

'I was just congratulating Hugh, here. Good work.' My puerile side would not allow me to extend the same sentiments to Patterson. 'Quite remarkable; two finds in so many months.'

'Well, someone has to—' Patterson started, but he was cut short by Costello, who had appeared at my side.

'Good day for the force, men, eh?' he said, his hand on my elbow to steady himself.

'Remarkable,' I repeated.

'Great work, boys,' he continued. 'Let's get it all back to the station for the papers.'

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I began to move in the same direction as Patterson and Colhoun, but Costello gripped harder on my elbow.

'Why aren't you watching Kerr?' Costello continued.

'I got a call out to come here,' I replied, already offended by what I sensed was my imminent exclusion.

'Kerr is your priority, Benedict. Understood?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, but he had already begun to hobble back towards the main group, leaning heavily on his walking stick.

As I drove away from the scene, trying not to look as embarrassed as I felt, I realized that, while Costello was right that the find looked good for An Garda in general, it also looked very good for him personally. And I realized that he had achieved the success he wanted for his retirement.

When I got to Porthall, I discovered that Kerr had never checked into the B&B. The owner told me she saw him being dropped off. He had waited until I drove away, then turned and begun to walk back up the road along which I had just driven.

As I indicated to pull out on to the road, I spotted the remains of his umbrella, all the spokes broken, discarded on the grass verge outside the woman's house, hunched like a metallic spider.

By the time I got back to the station the celebrations had begun. Someone had been to the off licence and had bought crates of beer and Costello was standing in the reception area with two bottles of Bushmill's whiskey which he was serving to those

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around him. As I passed he caught my eye and gestured towards a new poster on the wall behind him, inviting applications for Superintendent posts. He nodded as he handed me a drink. I took a proffered glass of beer and retreated to the storeroom at the back of the station's main area.

During a previous murder investigation my team had been given the use of the storeroom to coordinate things. Until then, we had all shared one large open-plan space, except for Costello who had his own office to the west of the building. After the case had concluded, the room had remained as a spare office.

I sat there, pretending to smoke an unlit cigarette and sipping at the beer while I flicked through the notes Costello had given me on Kerr. I have never really taken to whiskey in the way expected of an Irishman and could not differentiate between brands and ages in the ways I knew some of my colleagues could. But then, I had never really taken to drinking at all. At times this made me feel a bit of an outsider among the other men in the station who frequently went to the pub together after work. On the other hand, it suited my family life just fine.

I was studying the burn marks on the desk when the door of the storeroom opened and Caroline Williams came in, two bottles of beer in her hands.

'Want some company?' she said, smiling, beers held aloft.

'Sure, what's up?' I said, moving a chair towards her so she could sit.

Caroline and I had been partners for a few years now and,

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though we were colleagues, I couldn't say for certain that we were friends. She was a private woman who'd suffered more than once in her relationships with men and maintained a distance between her home and professional lives. It was a quality I admired in her, and knew I would do well to emulate on occasion myself.

'That's my question. What're you doing in here on your lonely ownsome?'

'I'm just going over some stuff about this guy Kerr.'

'It was some find,' she said, handing me one of the bottles which I took and placed on the desk. 'Patterson and Colhoun. It's really something.'

'Remarkable,' I found myself saying, again. 'Almost unbelievable.'

'Why?' Williams asked, pausing mid-drink.

'It's kind of a stretch for those two to find their desks of a morning, never mind something this big.'

'Do you think maybe you're a bit annoyed we didn't find them? Detective branch and all that?' she asked, raising her eyebrows.

'No . . . maybe. I don't know. I can't put my finger on it.'

'Hey, if it's good for the station, it's good for us. Forget about it.' She drained her beer and nodded towards the untouched one she'd brought in for me. 'You gonna drink that, partner?' she said, then burped and grinned.