Ambush

Paul Carson

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They arrived early, just as the first greyish streaks of daylight broke through a Dublin skyline.

'Shift it.' Sean Kennedy tapped on the driver's side of a black Toyota Corolla and the window slid open. The car was fogged from cheap French cigarettes and Kennedy waited until the air cleared and the two chain-smoking Russians inside stopped coughing. 'I'll cut in front of you at the end of the road. Keep about a five-minute gap between us so I can find a parking space. When I pull out you drive in and wait until I give the word.' Kennedy knew the men only by their first names, Alex and Matthe, and reckoned they were in their mid forties. Alex understood English better so Kennedy spoke mostly to him. 'Stay in constant contact.' Alex translated all this to his partner who was leaning across from the passenger side, his face a mixture of confusion and edginess. His expression didn't change as the instructions were explained.

They were in the driveway of a Georgian house at one end of a quiet road in an affluent south city suburb. Behind its bolted doors a middle-aged bank executive, his wife and three children were bound and gagged, and struggling to get free. But they were roped securely together in a bedroom and out of sight of any windows.

'Does Matthe know exactly what to do?' Kennedy loathed working with outsiders and this duo was worrisome. Their English was poor, they looked shifty and suspicious, and dressed like gypsies. But they were experienced killers and had brought a small arsenal of handguns, smoke bombs and explosive grenades.

Alex leaned his right hand out of the window and flicked a dead cigarette butt on to a sad-looking flowerbed. He fixed on Kennedy and held his gaze, his breath frosting in the chill morning air. 'He understands, Mr Kennedy. I have explained it to him like you said.' The engine was gunned alive and the Toyota edged away from the house, then turned right towards rush hour traffic already gathering on a main road five hundred yards ahead.

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Fuck you, thought Kennedy as he limped past a silver Saab coupé, its engine running to thaw ice clinging to the windscreen. The trussed-up banker owned both cars and by giving up the keys without too much of a struggle had protected his youngest daughter from a second lit cigar being ground into her face. Kennedy shivered as the cold penetrated, grabbed at the lapels of his overcoat and dug his chin deep for cover. He stopped at the gateway and looked up and down, then returned to the Saab, satisfied no one was watching.

The street was a mixture of terraced Georgian houses and grand, high, narrow-roofed detached villas. The area reeked of money and style, with electronically controlled gates protecting entrances and CCTV cameras recording all internal movements. There were trees along the pavements; the gardens were well-groomed and tidy, without debris, unusual in a city notorious for its litter. The residents were mainly well-to-do business types, barristers, surgeons and senior embassy personnel. Lights glowed in bedroom windows as other occupants stirred for the day ahead and already one top-of-the-range black Mercedes had crunched across gravel and out on to the main road before picking up speed and heading towards the city centre. It was five minutes past six on the morning of 10 February and a cold, crisp day, with a hint of snow you could almost smell in the air. The weather bureau had predicted heavy falls along eastern counties of Ireland, with black ice on inland country roads. By now, dark and angry-looking clouds were rolling in from the north, and temperatures were dropping, ice and frost clinging to every surface.

Harry Power, the fifty-eight-year-old Minister for Justice in the Irish government, was already up and dressed in his own spacious town house, halfway along the same street. He was a tall man, six three in his bare feet, with a broad frame and thick, coarse hands. He had cauliflower ears and a crooked nose from his rugby-playing days, yet a ruggedly handsome face despite these imperfections. Power was married to a woman twelve years younger and one inch shorter, making them an eye-catching couple whenever they ventured out on the Dublin social scene, which wasn't often as the government Minister detested small talk and gossip, preferring to be at home with his family or at work doing something useful.

Journalists nicknamed him 'the bruiser' but this had more to do with manner than appearance as he had a reputation of giving tough press briefings. He could scowl correspondents into submission or pull the legs from under them with a well-chosen caustic comment. There was general agreement he'd hardened recently, was now even less tolerant, snapping and snarling and cutting people short when they bored or bothered him with trivial matters.

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Alex drove slowly, checking rear-view and side mirrors for any unusual activity, any sign he was being followed. He was tall and bald, with a thick, bushy moustache that covered his flared nostrils. He wore denims and walking boots, with an oversized roll-neck and in between cigarettes chewed gum aggressively, as if frightened his jaws might lock if he stopped.

The traffic crawl on the two-lane artery was steady and the Russians soon cruised past shuttered shops, then a petrol station bustling into activity, with cartons of milk and that day's newspapers piled near the entrance. A youth of Oriental appearance yawned as he struggled to drag gas canisters on to the forecourt. Gradually it became a stop-start journey, with brake lights glowing intermittently along the lines of cars in front. Cyclists in protective headgear zipped past, legs pumping like pistons, dodging and weaving between vehicles. Alex negotiated a particularly dangerous roundabout, then cut through to the single city-bound intersection and another tailback. His mind began to drift until a sudden dig in his ribs focused his attention. Ahead a silver Saab coupé was stopped in a park-and-ride slipway, its sidelights flashing. 'Yeah, that's him,' he grunted and flicked the Toyota indicator, edging the car closer to the right. Now he could see Sean Kennedy, his head craned to check who was following. As the Saab moved out, Alex turned into the vacant spot and killed the engine. He glanced at his sidekick, noticing he was sweating despite the cold. 'Bud gatovi [Get ready],' he said, then grabbed a hand reaching into a side pocket. 'Ja chatu videt [No cigarettes. I want to be able to see].' He wetted his moustache with the tip of his tongue and unwrapped a fresh packet of Wrigley's, looking around to familiarise himself with the area.

To his right was a park surrounded by black railings and thick hedging. To his left, on the other side of the road, was an untidy group of shops including a dry-cleaners and pharmacy. There was little activity, with only an occasional pedestrian hurrying against the cold. 'This is good,' he muttered, 'very good.' Matthe nodded as he too checked the locale. Matthe was small and swarthy, with an untidy mop of dark hair, long side locks and twisting hairs coiled in both ears. He was an uneasy man, brown eyes darting nervously from side to side, fingers fidgeting without a cigarette to occupy them.

Eighteen months previously Justice Minister Harry Power's only son Michael, a sixteen-year-old boy with a bright future, had been found dead in a filthy downtown toilet, a syringe sticking out of a vein in his left arm. By the time the door was kicked in rigor mortis had locked the boy's frame and he had to be eased out of the cubicle and transported to the city morgue as discovered. And the tousle-haired Michael was still in that same half-bent, crouched position when his father came to identify the body lying on a white marble autopsy table surrounded by police officers who didn't know where to look. Harry Power stood over his son and wept. He grasped a cold and waxen hand, and tried desperately to straighten the curledup fingers. Then he

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squatted on his hunkers and stared into the lifeless eyes of the boy who happily had said 'cheerio' some twenty-four hours earlier, claiming he'd be back soon, that he was only going into town for a few hours. Yet somewhere along that final journey Michael had scored enough heroin to kill himself. No one knew who the dealer was and none of Michael's friends would admit any knowledge of his secret life or where he got money to buy drugs, or who had led him into that underbelly of society. Weeks later and Power was no wiser, breaking his heart even more. He could grieve, and did so openly and emotionally, but could get no understanding of his son's death. What was missing in his life that he needed heroin? He was young and talented, a straight As student, popular among his peers and a keen sportsman.

Sean Kennedy drove the silver coupé to the next set of traffic lights, then turned right and cruised for half a mile before swinging right again. He was on open road and against the flow of traffic, and put his good foot to the accelerator, pushing to fifty in a thirty-speed zone. All he could see was frosted rooftops, icy pavements and lights glowing in windows. No one was on the street. Fifteen minutes later he made another right and criss-crossed three narrow sidetracks until he was back in the driveway at the top end of the quiet road with its red-brick Georgian terraced houses and expensive detached villas. He checked his watch. Six thirty-five. Close, but still on time. Twenty-nine-year-old Kennedy was a native Dubliner and originally from a respectable middleclass suburb close to the city centre. He was six two, with blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, ice-blue eyes and tight, narrow lips. His left leg dragged, the result of an old knife injury that had severed a major nerve.

Harry Power's crusade began ten weeks after he buried his son. He was now a man driven by anger and revenge, determined to make an impact on the country's growing narcotics trade. He forced a series of measures through the Irish Parliament, including the decriminalisation of soft drugs such as cannabis, while possession of hard drugs such as heroin or cocaine carried a fifteen-year prison term.

Trading in or selling any compound, soft or hard, was increased to a mandatory twenty-year-without-parole sentence. However, Power's main targets were the criminal gangs who controlled the importation and supply routes. Using anti-terrorist legislation, the word of a senior police officer under oath was enough to convict traffickers and guarantee a life stretch. And life meant life, with no hope of release except in a coffin. Power later defended his policy at press briefings. 'These scum will be treated like the terrorists they've become. The burden of proof has shifted and they will no longer intimidate or threaten witnesses, or hire expensive lawyers for protection. They will no longer hold whole communities to ransom.'

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Ireland's police force, the Garda Siochana, was galvanised into action. For years they'd been constrained by insufficient evidence to clinch convictions against known drug barons. Witnesses would often retract statements at the last minute, or not turn up for court cases, or simply disappear off the face of the earth. Now, dawn raids became a common occurrence, with petty criminals and their associates lifted for questioning. Intelligence gathering showed five main groups involved in narcotics and within weeks many were either under arrest or had fled the country.

Sean Kennedy spoke briefly with Alex by cellphone, double checking position and readiness. His Russian henchmen were still parked in the slipway of a double-lane, one-way citybound road. However, one track was strictly for taxis and buses, forcing other traffic into a narrow line. His Saab parked in the front driveway of the banker's house, Kennedy kept the engine running with the heater on and opened a briefcase that lay on the passenger seat beside him. It was full of paperwork and pens, and a pocket calculator with figures on its display. He played idly with the keypad. With his ponytail tucked firmly underneath the lapels of his camelhair overcoat he looked just another business type starting his work as soon as he'd closed the front door. Underneath the pages rested a Heckler & Koch handgun, its safety catch off. At his feet lay two AN-M8 smoke grenades and a spare magazine of 9mm bullets. He loosened his shirt collar and ran a finger round his neck for comfort, then flicked the car heater to his feet where he felt the chill penetrate. Dark clouds now covered the city and any early morning brightness was turning to gloom.

Harry Power kissed his wife lightly on the cheek as she fussed around the kitchen table, preparing breakfast for their twin ten-year-old daughters moving about upstairs. She was redhaired, with high cheekbones and full lips, at that hour of the morning still in her night attire and wearing floppy slippers. 'Jane, I'll try to get home early,' he said, snatching at a bread roll and nibbling the corner before stopping as crumbs flaked on to his suit. Jane brushed the front of his jacket, straightened his tie and leaned up to peck his lips. Then she held his gaze severely. 'The girls are expecting you at the concert. Don't disappoint them, please.' Power slapped his brow and grimaced. He knew how important such events were to the twins, knew how much Jane was working to restore a normal family life. His wife had been a rock after their son's death, keeping everyone occupied and maintaining daily routines. Now he noticed her face tighten angrily. 'I'll cancel the last press conference and be back no later than six,' he promised. Jane's expression changed to a warning frown. 'You better be here or there'll be hell to pay later.' Power ran through the day ahead in his mind.

There was a Cabinet briefing at eight where he would present interim results of his anti-drug campaign. Later he would offer the same data to the press corps, then the rest of his diary was full with meetings, conferences and a planned visit to the courts mid afternoon for a photo call and TV interview with Sky news. His campaign had

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caught the world's attention and other police forces were watching developments with keen interest, quietly wondering how they might incorporate some of the controversial Irish legislation into their own criminal laws. 'I'll make it,' he promised, fleeing an even more threatening glare. He picked up a phone in the hallway and punched a ten-digit code. 'I'm ready.' His usual gravelly voice sounded hoarse and he cleared his throat.

Sean Kennedy edged the Saab slightly out of the gateway and stopped. He watched as an unmarked police car pulled up outside the Justice Minister's house and counted two passengers plus driver; each of whom he knew to be armed. Power's anti-drug war had made him enemies and a target for retribution. So every day before he opened his front door he contacted his bodyguards for clearance before leaving. There were also armed detectives on duty throughout the night. While the family slept, two shadowy figures patrolled the downstairs and garden.

Kennedy checked his watch: 6.45 a.m. Bang on time, changeover. He flicked the car heater full to windscreen and a light mist disappeared. Now he had a clear view of the frosted road and all that moved. 'They should be leaving within the next few minutes.' Kennedy spoke slowly and quietly into his cellphone. There was no reply and he glanced at the handset in case the battery was dead. But there was no warning light and this time he barked into the mouthpiece, 'Can you hear me? Where the fuck are you?' He felt his heart race.

Then a thick drawl eased his fears. 'I hear every word, Mr Kennedy. We are waiting.'

Now Kennedy noticed one of the detectives walking up and down the pavement, his gaze taking in the surroundings, then settling on the Saab. He was in a long open trench coat with a beige scarf draped round his neck and his hand reached inside the coat. Kennedy froze as he watched him dial on his mobile phone and felt underneath the pages in the briefcase until he touched the comforting steel of his handgun. Then he leaned back in his seat, cellphone to right ear as if in conversation. The bodyguard still stared in his direction, then suddenly turned round. Kennedy couldn't see what was happening and shifted forward in his seat, eyes darting nervously. Now the large frame of Harry Power bustled into view, carrying a briefcase in one hand and a heavy coat in the other. Kennedy slowly let out a deep breath as he watched the detective put his mobile away. In the cold morning air the exhaust from the police car blocked his vision but he heard doors slam and the vehicle pulled out, heading towards the main artery ahead. 'They're in a blue Ford Mondeo with dark tinted glass and two aerials on the roof. The registration is 03 98192736. There are four inside and our target is sitting behind the driver.'

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Harry Power was in ebullient mood. 'Did you see the match last night?' As he shifted around for comfort a bundle of Cabinet paperwork resting on his knees threatened to spill out of his briefcase. An armed detective in navy tracksuit and woollen cap sat beside him, eyes scanning the roads and sidewalks. He grunted an inaudible reply, implying lack of interest. Any conversation would be one-sided until the Justice Minister was safely offloaded at government buildings, some three miles and about fifty minutes' driving time ahead. 'United were rubbish, absolute rubbish.' Power scanned the most immediate document half-heartedly, then shoved it to one side. 'Giggs missed two sitters. I mean, he had an almost open goal and blasted over the bar each time. You should have seen Ferguson's face, he was livid.' But there was no response from his entourage and he reluctantly switched his attention to the pages in front of him. At one stage he checked his watch and looked outside to see how far they'd progressed. He recognised a small newsagent, its lights glowing in the increasing gloom, a single customer at the counter. They'd gained no more than half a mile and inbound city traffic was banked up some considerable distance ahead. A soft flurry of snow whorled in the wind, not heavy or lying, but steady.

Sean Kennedy broke two red lights and overtook dangerously to close in on the Ford Mondeo. He ignored angry horns and flashing lights, keeping up a running commentary on his cellphone with Alex. 'I've passed the Texaco garage on Collins Road.' Then, 'Now about eight cars ahead but everything's at a crawl. I reckon we're ten minutes away from you.' He was in a wide two-way carriageway fringed by office blocks on both sides, lights glowing and figures moving as another working day began. At one stage he swerved into a bus-only lane and gained three spaces before forcing the Saab back into line. More angry hoots and shaking fists, more lights flashed. He touched base with Alex again. 'I'm five cars behind and coming up to the traffic lights at Hawkins roundabout.'

They had scouted the area closely the previous day and this time Alex came back immediately, his voice clear and zinging with anticipation. 'You are getting close, Mr Kennedy.'

The driver of the police car was a careful man called Liam Grimes, with ten years' experience in surveillance and protection duty. The Ford Mondeo Grimes drove was modified, with a high-powered engine offering extra thrust for a quick retreat in emergencies, but as he edged forward at crawl pace in the rush hour he knew this was the most vulnerable part of the journey. He glanced at the digital clock on the dash. It was seven fourteen and he remembered the Justice Minister had to be in government buildings by eight at the latest. Come on, he urged silently. Move, move. He flicked the windscreen wipers and cleared a light dusting of snow. 'That looks a bitter day out there,' he offered to break the monotony. There was only one half-

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hearted reply and when he squinted in the rearvision mirror he noticed Power's head bent over paperwork. Outside the snow was falling more heavily, now settling on pavements. Umbrellas were snapping into action and Grimes silently wondered whether all this would slow them further. Then in his side mirror he spotted a silver Saab edge out from the row of vehicles behind and swerve back. The single line eased again and he touched off the accelerator gently. He considered pulling into the bus lane and cutting forward but knew the Minister would disapprove. And the media would have a field day if they found out: JUSTICE CHIEF CAN'T KEEP HIS OWN LAWS. So for a moment he idly inspected a small crowd milling around a bus stop, some huddled into their coats and jackets and stomping their feet, while others sullenly studied faces in the cars going past. Another forward move and Grimes recognised they were nearing Hawkins roundabout, a wide circular belt where traffic usually broke up. He glanced again in his side mirror. Whoever's in that Saab is in one helluva hurry.

Kennedy was four vehicles behind the Ford Mondeo when the line hit Hawkins roundabout. Here traffic could divert to different areas of Dublin's outer suburbs. Two roads led to the west and a motorway that circled the city, while another led to the eastern seaboard. The fourth cut into a major industrial estate and the final intersection carried remaining cars, vans and lorries towards the city centre. Kennedy knew Power's bodyguards always took the same route at this point. But getting access to the roundabout was a nightmare with vehicles careering at high speeds, often cutting across lanes and ignoring rights of way. It was here he made his move, first diverting to the inside bus corridor, then accelerating ahead of the Ford Mondeo. He sliced through oncoming traffic and cornered tightly and hard until he was within seconds of the city centre turn-off, then pressed his foot to the board. The Saab was forced through a congested tailback, then surged into the correct interchange, producing more angry blasts and shaking fists. But now Kennedy was where he wanted to be and barked into his cellphone, 'I'm there. Start looking.' He reached inside his overcoat and dragged out a balaclava, resting it on his knee. The Heckler & Koch was shoved firmly into his waistband and he began counting into the cellphone: 'One, two three . . .' The windscreen wipers swished furiously at the whiteness ahead.

The Russians stopped chewing. Both had slipped on black leather jackets; zipped tight to the neckline. Each had a hand grenade in one side with a smoke grenade in the other and spare bullet clips bulged their trousers. Kennedy's instructions allowed for a count to twenty over the cellphone and by now Alex could hear him call eleven. He nodded to his partner and they both dragged balaclavas over their heads, adjusting the eye slits. Matthe turned awkwardly so that he was kneeling on the passenger seat, head bouncing off the roof. He eased the safety catch off his pistol and opened the side door slightly, suddenly feeling ice-cold wind around his feet. He checked the street, watching someone huddled deep into an overcoat struggle with the shutters of the pharmacy. Further along, lights flickered in the dry-cleaning shop. The suburb was stirring and there were more pedestrians sheltering in doorways,

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waiting for their bus into town. Then, out the corner of an eye, he noticed one horrified face stare at him as a car ghosted past.

Liam Grimes, Power's driver, was suspicious. He'd only caught a glimpse of the silver coupé as it scorched past on the inside bus lane and hadn't time to follow its progress as he concentrated on negotiating traffic around the infamous Hawkins roundabout. But as the Ford Mondeo finally swerved into the city-bound road he felt sure it was ahead and still being driven erratically. His vision was further obscured by falling snow. Now he was in yet another oneway tailback running along an inside bus corridor. 'Sharpen up, everyone,' he snapped as he jammed on the brakes just in time to prevent the rear-ending of a VW Beetle in front. Inside, the three bodyguards stiffened and automatically reached for their handguns. Power's head shot up from his note taking. 'Anything wrong?'

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