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THE DEAL

MICHAEL CLIFFORD

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with high-grade plastic, to keep the heat in, creating a climate, cocooned from the world outside.

The body was up there now, lying face down among the plants, dried blood congealing in dark stains on buds that had just reached full maturity.

He could run. He could take off across the fields, keep going until he arrived back in the life he had left behind. He could be at home in a few hours. But that wasn't going to happen. What had just gone down was part of him now. The clock was not for turning back.

He felt a great wave washing through his body, rearing up against his throat, and he was suddenly bent over, throwing up onto the grass, right next to a saucer of cow dung. Then, when there was nothing else to throw up, the empty retches coughed from his stomach.

He straightened himself, and it was all over. He wiped his face with the back of his sleeve, shivered, and took a few deep breaths.

A sound issued from the pocket of his jeans. He felt the phone vibrate against his leg. He reached for it, but when he looked at caller ID, it was not relief that met him. One word showed across the screen. HASSLE.

The phone kept ringing, demanding attention, until he heard something from behind. 'Aren't you going to get that?'

He turned to see the two of them standing at the back door, squeezing his options.

He let the call ring out.

I

SEEDING

Chapter One

Dara Burns found the lane he was looking for. He swung the Kawasaki Classic into it, downed gears and killed the engine. He could hear his own breathing as the bike groaned towards silence.

The lane connected one of the main arteries through the residential neighbourhood with a parallel minor road. It was five fifteen a.m. A full moon was wringing the last out of the night, with a hint of dawn bleeding across the horizon.

Burns would have preferred total darkness. An approaching engine droned closer from the main road. He tensed. A car crowned with the light of a taxi plate drove past towards the airport.

He dismounted, and swung the small green rucksack from his shoulders. He unzipped the bag, taking out a two-litre plastic bottle that had once held Ballygowan sparkling water. Now it was nearly full of petrol. He uncapped the bottle. Hypnotic fumes rose to his nostrils. He poured the petrol over the Kawasaki, then shook the last drops from the bottle. He took the navy balaclava from the pocket of his jacket and threw it on the bike's engine. There was no helmet to worry him. Charlie Small had taken both when Burns had dropped him off five minutes earlier.

He reversed a few steps from the bike and took a Zippo lighter from the pocket of his leather jacket. With one hand on the

rucksack, he bent low towards the petrol and put fire to the edges of it. The ground lit up, like some biblical flame.

He was out on the street, walking at pace, when a muffled explosion sounded from the lane. He walked for another ninety seconds before a car came his way. It was heading south, towards him, a taxi with its light on. Burns flagged it down and sat into the front passenger seat.

The driver was white and fat and wore thick bifocal glasses. Burns didn't have a problem with black taxi drivers, but he felt somehow reassured that this guy was Caucasian. If there ever was a problem later, if this fella was put in front of an ID parade, the odds were good that he would develop memory problems. You just couldn't say the same for some guy who could scoot back to Africa.

The driver kept eyes front. 'Where to?' he said.

'Beaumont Hospital.'

The driver glanced in his wing mirror, and swung the car around.

'A and E is it?' he said, looking across at Burns, in search of the damage.

'Intensive care.'

His head turned again, as if he had missed something first time around.

'My gran's in there,' Burns said. 'She's on her last legs.'

'Sorry to hear that,' the driver said. Burns looked at his ID badge on the dashboard. His name was Sean Carson. He tried to memorise the number, just in case it was needed later.

'Comes to all of us, I suppose,' this Sean Carson said. 'She had a good innings?'

'She's eighty-seven. The innings? I don't know.'

He slumped into the seat. It hadn't been his gig. Pascal Nix had phoned him the previous evening, just as he was going out the door to the hospital.

There was a problem. Charlie Small was taking care of a body who had gone offside, and his chauffeur had pulled out at the last minute.

The guy had arrived from Limerick. He had agreed to the job over the phone. But after he'd walked into Nix's gaff, he'd taken one look at Charlie Small, another at the Kawasaki Classic, and asked Small what he weighed.

Small was straight up, shaving nothing off his twenty-two stone, not that he could have hidden it. The guy shook his head, said it wasn't worth the risk, starting out on a job with that kind of handicap.

He walked straight out, Nix shouting after him that there'd be consequences for his actions. Then Nix had rung Burns to step into the breach. Burns didn't like it but he knew it was one of those occasions when he couldn't say no. In any case, he hadn't done a lot of work lately. There wasn't much doing, the way things were.

He'd agreed and driven Small. It wasn't as bad as the other fella had made out. Even with Charlie Small on the pillion, the bike still moved like the hammers of Hell after Small did the target.

The taxi driver looked over at him. 'Rough night,' he said.

'I've had worse.'

* * *

Karen Riney didn't hear the sirens, if there were any, while she was walking on the beach. It was around six a.m., the dawn rising to meet the day. There was nobody else about at that hour and the tide was low.

She walked over and back on the sand, next to a line of spongy seaweed, from the ancient castle at one end to where the beach

came to a stop at the other side, in the shadow of the huge house that had once been a summer home for nuns.

The only sound was of the seagulls nattering to each other as they wheeled above the shoreline, steering clear of a bank of clouds lurking with intent out in the bay. Beyond, a mist had settled on the mountain peaks. Ballinskelligs didn't wake up for another couple of hours at least. She owned the beach, the sky, the sea, even the little vessels anchored offshore, lapping against the dawn's gentle swell.

She made for a solitary figure traipsing across the sand, her brown bob of hair bouncing to her stride, blue eyes focused on the distance, a Jewish nose sharpening her profile.

She did three full laps, over and back, moving fast in her grey and orange lightweight Asics sports gear. By the end of the third, her back felt damp and she knew the colour in her cheeks had deepened to a bright red. She broke from her route and headed for the entrance to the beach, up through the dry silver sand, which kicked up to the touch.

The walk had served to reassure her about the course she was about to embark on.

She would sit down, have her grapefruit, a bowl of granola with strawberries and a nice cup of fruit tea. By then, Jake would be willing, if not ready, to meet the day. She would deliver the news, and await his response.

Any resistance would surprise her. This experiment hadn't worked out, and Jake knew that as well as she did. It wasn't going anywhere. The initial spark, for what it was worth, had flickered and died.

He'd known where she was coming from, bouncing around on the rebound, but he still wanted her down here and she had little better to be doing. But now that was it. She had to get out before she began to dislike him.

She was already halfway out the door, the bum-bag strapped to her waist holding her money, passport, phone and driver's licence. All of her that remained at the house was the packed rucksack, sitting in the kitchen.

There was the other issue, of course. She would assure Jake that her lip was buttoned. Her story, for anybody who enquired, would be that Jake had inherited some money and decided to get out of the city, move down to the wilds of south Kerry in order to . . . well, if it wasn't going to sound too corny, to find himself. She smiled. He'd be looking for a long time.

Once she hit the car park, at the entrance to the beach, she stopped, just to take in the sea air one last time. She opened the bum-bag, unzipped a little internal compartment, took out her silver wedding band and slipped it onto the designated finger. She held her hand up, just to give it the once-over. The gesture gave her a little lift. It was the first time she'd worn it in a few months.

Karen Riney walked through the empty car park and out onto the road. Once she got back to the city, she'd try again for a job. That was something she was taking away from these borrowed weeks down here. She was ready to work again.

It was a seven-minute trot to the house, which was set far enough away from the beach for privacy. The house in which she was staying was one half of a pair of identical bungalows done in grey brick and brown roof tiles, tilted towards each other inside a gate of timber slats. She and Jake were staying in one house, the plants in the other.

The road twisted and turned as it climbed. Just after she rounded the last bend, and the houses came into view, she saw the two vehicles parked outside the gates.

One was a white Mondeo garda squad car. The other looked like a Ford Focus, with a flashing light on its back windscreen, sending blue notes out into the silent morning.

Karen stopped and stared for a second. She moved closer, to where she could get a view. The front door to the house where she and Jake were staying was open. She couldn't see anybody, but she would have bet her bottom dollar that if she gave it thirty seconds or so bodies would spill from the house.

The door to the house next door was also open. While the blinds were down, she thought she detected movement behind one of the ground-floor windows. Each room of that house was more or less full of plants. Right now, the whole shebang had been blown through the roof. And with it poor Jake.

She took a deep breath. Not her fight. Not her life. She turned and walked back down the hill. Her clothes and toiletries in the packed rucksack would have to be sacrificed, but it was a no-brainer. She wasn't going back in there.

She didn't run. She concentrated on sounds. A procession of vehicles would be calling any minute now, and once they approached she had best adopt the role of early-morning jogger. It was a hell of a way to depart, but at least she was leaving.

Burns felt it as he was walking in through the lobby of the hospital, just after he nodded at the security guard. He knew then that Gran was gone. He walked down the long corridor, past a pair of nurses who looked spent after a night's work. He stepped into the lift to take him to ICU on the first floor.

He thought for a moment about that woman tonight, the wife. When he was on the front lawn, after Charlie Small had shot the target once, the woman had looked out from the front window. She'd had a baby in her arms, fear pulling at her face. Maybe the child couldn't sleep and she was up with it. There was no way she

would ever be able to pick him out in an identity parade. He had on both the helmet and the balaclava. All she got was his eyes. You couldn't convict a man on his eyes.

He could see her now, sitting on a couch in that front room, a couple of shades holding her hand, telling her they'd get the scumbags.

When the lift door opened, Sharon was standing there, bathed in grief.

'Where were you?' she said. 'I've been ringing for the last hour.'

Burns had left his phone at home. Carrying it on a job would be like leaving a trail of fingerprints. 'My phone's down,' he said. 'She's gone.' It wasn't a question.

Sharon nodded, tear tracks on her cheeks. She looked completely worn out. She had been home from England for the last four days, since they'd known the end was near. All that time she'd rarely left the hospital. Gran and Granddad had raised the pair of them after their mother was taken. They had been the only real family Burns and his sister had had and now they were both gone.

Burns placed his hand on Sharon's arm, turned to go down the corridor towards the ICU. She shook her head and pulled herself free. 'We waited for an hour,' she said. 'I didn't think you were coming. They've taken her away. Where the fuck were you?'

For the last few days, Burns had been getting this sort of stuff from his sister. 'Where were you?' 'Why aren't you doing more?' 'She's your gran too. If she hadn't been around, you wouldn't have been so much reared as dragged up.' He hadn't reacted to any of it. Sharon had to let off a little steam, to compensate for having left her son and her asshole of a husband in Brixton to come over here and play undertaker for the family. And now, when it was all over, she couldn't just leave well enough alone. He was willing to go the extra mile, just this one last time.

'I didn't think for a second it would happen tonight. Something came up. I had to do a favour for a friend who was in a jam.'

The lift door swished open and a young guy wearing a medic's loose green rig-out stepped out. He nodded at the couple as if he was familiar with the disposition of the recently bereaved.

'You were doing somebody a favour,' Sharon said. She was straight into her I-don't-believe-it pose.

'Yeah. It doesn't matter now. I'm left with having missed this for the rest of my life.'

She gave him a look. 'I'd say you're really bothered.'

But he was. For the last few days, particularly when he'd come in and sat beside Gran, Burns had been thinking back over his life, and how this was a major juncture. She had raised them, and if she hadn't been there, they would have ended up in a home, and Burns knew the fuck-ups that came out of those homes.

He'd really wanted to be there at the end of something so major in his life. He'd really thought Gran would see through the night, as she had all the other nights for the last week since she'd taken the turn.

They went down in the lift, and walked the length of the corridor to the entrance. Outside, the day was opening up, cold and grey. In the distance, headlights fingered their way up the approach road through the dawn, the hospital coming alive for another round of fixing up and burying.

Sharon pulled a packet of John Player Blue from her handbag. Burns could see now that she was completely wrecked. She seemed unsteady on her feet, like somebody who was drunk or had just emerged from under the knife. She had on a new sky-blue blouse, bought just yesterday from Penneys in Artane because she had run out of the clothes she brought over. The jeans were the same ones she had worn since arriving, as were the high-heeled shoes.

'You better get some rest,' he said to her.

She peered at him through the smoke, nothing on her face. 'She wanted a wake. At the house.'

Burns shrugged. 'I'll go along with whatever.'

Sharon finished her cigarette and began walking towards the taxi rank, heels echoing in the early morning. She got into a car and it took off. Burns stood there for a minute, feeling alone. He had been on his own for a long time, but Gran was always there in the background, waiting, as he saw it, for him to fuck up. Now he could do it all by himself.

* * *

Karen had been walking for at least three miles. In that time, one squad car had sped past, en route, she was sure, to Jake's place. When she heard it approach, she turned and broke into a jog, ensuring that they wouldn't see her face. When it sped past, she saw the driver, a huge guy, behind the wheel. She expected to see the brake lights suddenly come to life, but the car kept going.

Now she was hot and her legs were protesting. She had been on the beach a good half-hour before all this had blown up. Cahirciveen, the nearest town, was still five or six miles away. When she heard the rumble of another engine behind her, she pulled in towards the ditch and, on an impulse, stuck out her thumb. Hitching was still safe in this part of the world – or at least it was until something happened.

The van slowed to a halt. She ran towards the pumping exhaust pipe and the winking orange light. The cab smelt of damp clothes and cigarettes. The driver was a large man with a crew-cut and a few days' growth on his face. He was wearing a blue V-neck jumper that had seen better days over an off-white shirt opened at the collar. It hadn't been that colour when it had started out in life, but it was now.

'Thanks,' she said, but he just pulled at the gearstick and took off. The sound of early-morning radio floated through the cab. Karen recognised the song, 'Start A War'. 'The National,' she said.

He looked startled, as if she wasn't supposed to talk.

'The National.' She pointed at the radio. 'Great band.'

His eyes fell to her outstretched finger. 'Yes,' he said.

Karen got the message. That was the extent of the conversation they would have. The National gave way to a haunting Elvis Costello song, something post-punk but before his middle-age phase. Karen concentrated on trying to recognise it while the Ballinskelligs Barbarian kept his eyes on the road, not a peek out of him.

She couldn't imagine how Jake was going to handle this. In the short time they had been together, she'd recognised he was good fun, but he'd never struck her as somebody who could withstand pressure. He'd taken on the job to sort out a debt for some small-time dealing he'd been involved in. He had never been arrested before, as far as Karen could make out. Prison would be a whole new experience for him. There was no way he was going to drag her into it. Was there?

They arrived in the outskirts of Cahirciveen as a light mist began to fall. She asked him to drop her at the Supervalu.

'Closed,' he said.

It speaks. She told him not to worry about it, and he didn't. She thanked him as she stepped from the cab.

She took shelter under the canopy for the petrol pumps outside the shop. Inside, men and women in what appeared to be uniforms were scurrying around, preparing the place for another day. A man emerged with a yellow docket in his hand. He stepped up into the cab of a truck. Karen took a chance, walked around to the driver's side. He was looking down at something on his lap and then he saw her. He lowered the window.

'Any chance of a lift?' she said.

He looked at her standing in the drizzle, a sheen of rain forming on her head. 'Where you going?'

'Where are *you* going?'

'I asked first,' he said. She laughed for the sake of a lift and shrugged.

'How does Killarney suit you?' he said.

She walked around to the passenger side and pulled herself up.

This lift was full of everything the last had been lacking. The guy said his name was George, and he worked right across Munster. Today's delivery was a one-off affair or he wouldn't have made it to Killarney. Usually he would have had to stop off at every branded store along the road. 'Selling, it's a mug's game,' he said.

'Maybe it's just become a mug's game,' Karen said. 'When the boom was here I was away in Australia, but whenever I came back I could see it. There was no selling. It was all buying. Nobody had to sell anything.'

'You left Australia to come back here?'

'It's a long story,' she said, her tone business-like to divert him down another avenue.

He took the hint, began going on about his job, how, bad and all as it was, there were cutbacks looming in the company and everybody was on edge.

She was looking at a sealed box of Snack bars at her feet. Right now, Jake was most likely being questioned by the police. None of this was going to be easy for him. A great hunger came over her. She must have walked a good ten miles this morning. She would have killed for a shower, but she'd make do with a tiny piece of nourishment. 'Mind if I have a bar?' she said.

He paused. 'Be my guest.'

Drizzle had turned to rain by the time she jumped down from the truck. He dropped her outside the railway station in Killarney. As she had guessed he would, he asked for her number.

She said she'd take his and give him a shout when she got back to Kerry. He scribbled it out with a pencil, resignation on his face.

There was an hour-long wait for the Dublin train. Under the platform's canopy she looked at the rain beating down. More than anything, this was what she missed about Sydney. Sure, it rained there, but the rain served notice and came down hard and fast, then stopped, and went about its business elsewhere. There was none of this hanging around like a threat of more to come. OK, she'd grown up here, but nearly a decade away had allowed her to forget. And here she was, over a year back in the place, and she was still having trouble returning.

There was no way Jake was going to haul her into it. He wasn't that kind of guy. He might get it into his head that she was using him. What if he came to the conclusion that she'd grassed on him? What if the police began planting that notion in his head?

Listen to her. You'd swear she knew this man, that she had deep feelings for him. They'd passed in the night, little more than that. If the opportunity arose, she'd try to help him out. But it was his gig. Nothing to do with her.

She dozed through the train journey, finally coming awake as the carriage pulled lazily out of Portlaoise. While she had been gone, a woman and a girl had sat into the seat opposite. The easy way they engaged with each other said they had to be mother and daughter.

Outside, the day was brightening. Beyond the town, as the ribbons of houses receded, she could see a film of rain on the grass.

She was bushed by the time the train pulled into Heuston.

As she moved up the aisle towards the door it occurred to her that the law might be on to her already. She ducked down for a scone out the window, but all that occupied the platform was passengers moving to the exit.

Her bones felt stiff as she stepped off the train. Were they gaping at her, these passengers with their travel bags or handbags, wondering why she travelled so light in sweat gear, looking like she was in serious need of a shower? She kept the head down and thought about jets of water shooting onto her skin.

Stoneybatter was a short walk, over the low tide of the Liffey and up the hill until the steeple of the Greek Orthodox Church hove into view. And, beside it, the prison. Arbour Hill. She picked up pace as she walked past the grey walls. They cosseted the sex abusers in there for their own safety. Maybe that was where they'd bring Jake, to billet him with men who were a threat to children but not adults.

Five minutes later she pushed open the door to Heaven's Gate. The angel shop was tucked in among the convenience stores, hairdressers and off-licences on Manor Street, the main drag through Stoneybatter. The woman behind the counter looked up and saw her. She had a kind face, her hair tied back in a ponytail. She was shaped like an orange, round in the middle. A smile of surprise lit her up, but when she gave Karen a second take, it expanded into delight.

She walked around from the counter and approached Karen, who couldn't help but think that this angel was coming to rescue her. The angel wordlessly gathered her into a hug.