

A  
PRAYER  
for  
MARY

NORMAN HALL

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## PROLOGUE

1984

*Wee Orla McGrath's starin' at me, so she is, lyin' in her wee bed just next to mine and she's snivellin' and I pray to God she's not goin' to cry again and keep me awake. But she's only twelve, so she is, just a wean, and I promised to look after her so I'm holdin' her hand and givin' it a wee squeeze. I can hear one or two others sobbin', another couple gigglin' and a few snufflin' and mumblin'; they must be dreamin' already or somethin'. The fire in the dorm will be goin' out soon and my nose is cold, so it is, so I pull the blanket up to keep it warm. The clock outside in the hall has just struck eight so there's hours to go before we get up but I'm not sleepy because I keep thinkin' about baby Jesus and what he's doin' tonight and what he'll be doin' the morra. I know what I'll be doin' the morra 'cos it's the same thing every day. After prayers and porridge, I'll be scrubbin' the stone floor in the chapel, so I will, and that'll take up the mornin' and then we'll have a wee bowl of tattie soup and then I'll be down in the laundry room with the rest of them boilin' up the clothes and then it'll be evenin' prayers and then tatties again with a wee spoon of mince and then in twenty-four hours I'll be lyin' here with wee Orla McGrath starin' at me all over again holdin' my hand. There's the sharp sound of the big metal bolt on the door and Orla gives out a wee shriek because she's a wee mouse and she takes her hand away and pulls the cover over her head and everyone else is now awake and everyone's quiet, waitin'. "Mary Keane!" It's scary Sister Margaret so it is, and she's shoutin' my name and I don't know what I've done this time. "Mary Keane!" she says again and she's shoutin' and gettin' angry, and I push back the cover and sit up. "Come here now girl!" she says, and I put my feet on the stone floor and it's freezin' so it is, and I walk towards the door and Sister Margaret's there with nice Sister Fiona behind her and the light from the hallway is spillin' into the*

room and everyone's holdin' their breath and I see Clodagh Kelly peekin' out from under the covers and sniggerin', so she is, the wee bitch. "Come on!" says Sister Margaret, stern as ever and she pushes me ahead of her and Sister Fiona bolts the door again and the sound echoes in the hallway where the candles are flickerin' and Jesus is lookin' down at me from the other end. But he's not my Jesus; he's the first Jesus, so he is, not the second, not my Jesus. Sister Margaret's pushin' me in the back, and I go up the stairs where I'm not supposed to go, and it's a long way up and up and the wood floor is warmer than the stone so my feet are not so freezin' but it's still cold because I only have my wee nightdress on. And then she's pushin' me again "Go on!" and walks past me and stops at a big wooden door and taps on it and I hear someone inside say "Come" and she pushes me inside and the door shuts behind me with a big clunk. It's lovely and warm, so it is, and there's a big fire roarin' in the hearth and the floor is warm too and there's one of them big beds with a post at each corner and lights either side. And there he is, sittin' in the big armchair in front of the fire and I recognise him straight away. It's the Father! Not my Daddy, you understand; the Father. And his face is gentle and smilin' and his hands are together as if he's prayin' and he says in a kindly voice, "Hello there Mary. Do you remember me?" I nod my head because I'm not allowed to speak to anyone, and he says "You can talk to me you know. You can say anythin' to me." And all I can say is "Yes, Father." He says, "I was visitin' the Sisters and God said to me to go and see how wee Mary Keane's gettin' on" and I don't know what to say and I can't speak because I'm so happy that God has remembered me, and the Father has remembered me too. "Come closer my child and warm yourself by the fire," he says, and I step forward and there's big rug in front of the fire and it's warm as toast, so it is, and it feels lovely on my feet and the Father's smilin' at me in a very kindly way and he says, "How old are you now, Mary?" and I say "Fifteen, Father" and he says, "Goodness me, you'll soon be a grown woman. But you'll

*always be a child of God,” and I feel my face gettin’ hot but it’s probably just the fire. “You know Mary, God has sent me as is his messenger to tell you he loves you and to thank you for givin’ birth to baby Jesus,” he says, and I think I’m goin’ to cry because I miss my baby Jesus but I fight to hold it back and I can feel God’s love all around me, “and God said to me ‘Father’ he said, ‘go and see my wee Virgin Mary and tell her I love her and I want her to feel my love inside her’ that’s what he said. Do you feel God’s love inside you Mary?” and I have to wipe my nose on my sleeve and I’m goin’ to cry because I remember when I had God’s love inside me before, it hurt but the Father had said God’s love was the most powerful thing on earth so it was supposed to hurt and he was right but it only hurts the first time and then everythin’s fine. “Are you sure you’ve got God’s love inside you Mary? Because God has so much love to give, he wants to give it to everyone, especially to you Mary,” and I cry tears of joy that God is thinkin’ of me and the next time scary Sister Margaret gives me the cane, or I get locked in the cellar or have to go without my dinner I’ll think of God’s love and everythin’ will be all right. The Father’s holdin’ out his hand and I reach out and my hand is shakin’ and the Father’s sayin’ “Come and kneel before me Mary and we’ll say a wee prayer and then I can give you God’s love” and I’m kneelin’ in front of the Father and I close my eyes and put my hands together and the fire is hot and he says “do you remember what you have to do Mary?” and I think I remember but the last time the Father gave me God’s love I was only fourteen and only a child “I think I do Father,” I says and he leans forward and puts a hand on the top of my head and starts to say a prayer and I feel so happy I think I’m goin’ to burst.*

## CHAPTER 1

A stiff westerly blew in across the shore, creating tiny ripples in the waves of the outgoing tide, the strength of the breeze sufficient to allow the gulls and crows foraging for morsels in the pebbly sand to get airborne simply by spreading their wings, and once in the air, to hover and swoop without discernible effort. The sun's rays shone like spotlights through gaps in clouds that scudded across the blue November sky affording sporadic warmth to an otherwise crisp, chilly day.

Out in the Channel a mile or two distant, a scattering of freighters and tankers, seemingly becalmed, awaited their turn to unload and then load new cargo at Southampton. Close to the shore, a solitary heron stood motionless on a sandbank, trying its best to ignore an angry gull that swooped down repeatedly towards it emitting a loud screech, before swinging upwards again like a pendulum, ready to repeat the attack.

Jack Fleming watched the avian confrontation with fascination. He knew the average gull was notoriously aggressive, especially towards humans stupid enough to flaunt anything edible, but this dispute had either to be about territory or some perceived threat. The heron casually stood its ground despite the gull's provocation, ducking periodically and letting out a squawk of irritation at one particularly close encounter. After a while, he spotted the reason for the aggressor's anxiety. A baby gull swam in the shallows thirty feet from the heron, bobbing its head under the water from time to time, oblivious to any threat.

Jack was no stranger to herons, having had personal experience and a grudging respect for their ability to feast on a garden pond full of his goldfish, but he had never before seen a heron take another bird. Despite the gull's tirade, the heron seemed disinterested. He knew it was all part of the act, a precursor to the strike, but it would be a remarkable heron indeed that could strike at its prey from a distance of thirty feet. He was amused by the gull's antics, wondering how long

it would be before it tired itself out or was eventually swatted by the larger bird running out of patience, when the baby launched itself into the air and flew off, pursued by its irate parent. The heron remained statuesque, apparently unperturbed.

Jack turned to the wind and resumed his walk, picking his way carefully across limpet strewn rock and back onto the soft sand. He was glad he had come. "It'll do you good to get away for a bit," Barry had suggested, more out of concern than any real expertise in the psychological benefits of 'getting away'.

"By myself? What kind of break is that?" he'd protested.

"Why don't you ask Charlie to go with you?" Barry had said helpfully, and Jack had let out a snort of derision, aimed squarely at himself.

"The last thing my darling daughter wants is to be stuck in a seaside cottage with her old man for a week, especially now she's preoccupied with her git of a boyfriend."

"Maybe it would be a chance to do a bit of bonding?" Jack had been unconvinced at the time and not just about the prospect of any 'bonding' but Barry had persisted. "Look, you'll be amazed at how different things will look with a change of scenery. Clear your head. A new perspective will emerge, trust me."

"So, you're a psychoanalyst, now?" he'd retorted, truculent and dismissive.

"No, mate. It's common sense. You know I'm right. Look," Barry often started a sentence with 'look' to add gravitas and focus attention, "you've been through massive change and to be brutally honest," he loved it when Barry was brutally honest, "you've not been yourself, shut away in that big house with nothing to do. It's not the way you were built. You're a pale shadow, mate. We're worried about you. Anyway, you don't have to go far."

The Isle of Wight certainly wasn't far, Jack thought. But he had to admit, the mere fact of packing a bag, driving to the south coast, getting on the ferry and leaving the mainland

behind had turned out to be an adventure in itself. He didn't crave foreign travel, near or far. He'd done more than enough of that during his working life and there was no longer any attraction. All that wasted time in hideous airports, crammed into a tin tube with the great unwashed, breathing second-hand air and eating terrible food, even in business class, and then checking into a ghastly hotel for a couple of days before doing the whole thing in reverse. They'd been working trips, not holidays and they'd put him off flying for life, at least, as a passenger. He'd flown over the Isle of Wight a hundred times but never set foot there so it seemed like a reasonable place of escape. And if he got bored, he could go home whenever he wanted.

He hadn't been bored. The cottage was compact but clean and tidy, within walking distance of pubs, restaurants and shops and he'd spent most of the daylight hours walking the myriad footpaths on and around the coast 'clearing his head', before retiring to the cottage in the afternoon to read a trashy novel, something he'd never found time to do before. Then knocking up an easy supper or going to the pub for pie and chips. And paradoxically, time had flown, even though this week, he felt he'd lived life at a much slower pace.

He couldn't be sure it had worked, gained him any new perspective or cleared his head. But he had no regrets about coming, despite the questionable November weather, and he found he'd had time to mull things over without the constant physical reminders of the past which, at home, would just carry on haunting him, holding him back.

Out in the shallows, a group of windsurfers were taking advantage of the robust wind, the riders leaning over at forty-five degrees as they scooted at high speed across the otherwise calm seas. It looked exhilarating, one of the many adrenalin-fuelled sports he'd never had time to try when he was working. He wondered what new activity he might take up when he got home. Golf? Cycling? Tennis? He could join a gym and rediscover the athletic physique he sported twenty-five years ago. Maybe he could get his license back? He



hadn't flown in years, but there was no greater escape than being up there, alone in the clouds, and now, he could easily afford it. He had so much choice and for the first time in his life, plenty of time, yet somehow having so many options didn't make it any easier.

At forty-eight and with more money than he knew what to do with, he need never work again. He was financially secure for life, assuming Charlie didn't ruin him with her spendthrift ways. He missed her and she was the only thing he had to worry about, but he was happier alone for now. Even if she had wanted to come with him, she'd have lasted twenty-four hours before she'd want to get back to Gavin. The git.

He breathed in the ozone rich air and sauntered on, scouring the sand for imaginary treasure washed up on the shore, periodically glancing out to sea in wonder at its scale and power and passing other walkers, many with excitable dogs, exchanging pleasantries like they were old friends. There was always something of interest on a beach and he pondered for the umpteenth time this week, whether he should move to the coast.

He needed caffeine. He'd read in the guidebook the Beachcomber Café was somewhere close by and boasted an extensive range of artisan coffees. He'd stop and refuel. He held up a hand in greeting to a couple who were trudging through the shingle with a golden retriever and his eye fell on a house perched on the cliff above the beach. It was set back fifty yards from the edge and from where he stood, he could see it had grey timber cladding, floor-to-ceiling glass on the ground floor and a balcony upstairs. He wondered how property prices compared to where he lived in Oxfordshire and although the house itself didn't appear ostentatious or luxurious, the view would be priceless. He fantasised for a moment about buying it, but dismissed the idea as fanciful.

"Morning!" he called to the couple as they passed and was about to ask them if they knew the location of The Beachcomber when, without warning, he felt a blow to the back of the head and a threadbare yellow tennis ball landed in

the sand at his feet. The couple laughed and he shook his head comically as if to exaggerate the injury, then bent to pick up the ball just as a brown and white springer spaniel overtook him, performed a dramatic four-legged slide in the sand followed by an abrupt U-turn, and stopped in front of him, barking loudly.

“Hello young man,” said Jack, uncertain of quite how to address a strange dog, never having had one himself. The spaniel barked repeatedly, jumping around on the spot, tongue and tail wagging in unison. Jack tossed the ball ahead of him as far as he could throw, and the dog chased after it without hesitation. He turned around and saw fifty yards behind him a woman standing still, ball launcher in her right hand, the left clasped over her mouth.

“Sorry!” he heard her shout. “I’m so sorry!” Jack laughed and waved.

“Good shot!”

She broke into an awkward run. She wore a dark green waterproof jacket over black walking trousers and designer wellington boots. Her hair was long and crinkly and red, and she swept it away from her face as she approached. He judged her to be late thirties and he was immediately struck by her freckled cheeks, pink from either windchill or embarrassment, he couldn’t tell.

“I’m so sorry,” she said again but before he could reply the spaniel was back, dropping the tennis ball at his feet and barking vociferously. “I’m afraid you’re committed,” she said. “You’re his best friend now. You’ll have to throw it again.” She had a pronounced Irish accent. Jack had been there many times on business and recognised the Derry English. He turned and tossed the ball and the spaniel raced after it. “I’m really sorry,” she said for the third time. “Are you okay? I’m not safe with this thing,” she said, holding up the ball launcher.

Jack felt guilty. He was enjoying her embarrassment and she was very easy on the eye. He grinned at her. “It’s only a tennis ball. No harm done. What’s his name?”

“Jerry.”

“Jerry?”

“He’s a springer.”

Jack hesitated then nodded, pretending he understood the connection, which he didn’t. “Oh, yeah.” She laughed and her eyes lit up. They were emerald-green, and her teeth gleamed white in the sunshine. He forced himself to look away, but only for a second. Jerry was back again. He picked up the ball and turned to her. “May I?” She handed him the launcher. He loaded the cup and swung it from behind his head, propelling the ball a hundred yards down the beach. Jerry was back within twenty seconds. “Does he never get tired?”

“Nope. Not until he gets home and then he just crashes.”

“Sounds like my kind of dog.” Jerry barked and leapt around, demanding attention.

“C’mon you,” she said, picking up the ball and putting it in her pocket. “Walk’s over.” Jerry whined and barked and then whined again as she leaned over and attached the lead to his collar. “Nice to meet you and sorry again for assaultin’ you.”

“Really, it was nothing. I had fun and it was nice to meet you too. Both of you.” She turned away and his thoughts returned to caffeine. “Excuse me?” he called after her. She turned and tossed back her hair. “Is the Beachcomber Café far from here?”

“No, just about half a mile. But you’re out of luck. It’s only open April to October. Tourist season.”

“Okay, thanks. Never mind.”

“Is it coffee you’re after?”

He shrugged. “It’s that time of day,” he said, and she let the comment go for a second or two.

“I can do you a coffee. I live just here.” She pointed to the grey timber-clad house on the cliff. “I owe you that at least. C’mon and I’ll put the kettle on.”

## CHAPTER 2

Jerry led the way, bounding up the stone steps that snaked up to the top of the cliff fifty feet above the beach, and they crossed the lawn to the front door of the house. Close up, it was even more impressive than he'd first thought. Simple yet sophisticated with a tidily laid out garden and a year-old Volkswagen Golf on the drive. A double-width front door and timber-clad porch bisected the front elevation, and on each side, glazed patio doors would allow the entire front of the house to be opened to the air. Jack kicked off his boots in the porch and followed the woman inside.

"Hang your jacket up," she called, climbing a few steps into the open plan kitchen and he followed her tentatively in stocking feet, sensing the warmth rising from the white marble floor. The décor was modern and striking. Deep gloss-white kitchen units with white marble splashbacks, black granite worktops and stainless-steel appliances. Chrome light pendants dangled over a long breakfast bar that separated the sink, hob and ovens from a dining area furnished with a light oak dining table and six chairs arranged in front of the sliding patio doors.

She placed a chrome espresso maker on the hob and retrieved a couple of white mugs from the overhead cupboard.

"Milk and sugar?"

"Black thanks."

"Take a seat." She wore a simple white tee-shirt and her long red hair tumbled halfway down her back. Her arms bore freckles like those on her face but were otherwise white with no trace of tanning. She was slim at the waist, widening elegantly at the hips and he concluded she looked as good from behind as she did from the front. "Quite an impressive place you have. Have you been here long?"

"No. Not long."

He thought it wasn't much of an answer, nor something he really needed to know, but then he was only making

conversation. Jerry had slurped his way noisily through a bowl of water, wolfed down the contents of his food bowl and now lay curled up in a wicker basket in the corner of the open-plan sitting room. Jack suddenly felt awkward, as if he were intruding in some way, but he reminded himself she had invited him. Maybe she was regretting it. He tried again, deciding to be a little braver.

“What’s a Derry girl doing on the Isle of Wight?” She turned abruptly and put both hands on her hips. He spotted the absence of rings on her left hand and was suddenly conscious of the wedding band on his.

“Donegal actually.”

“Whoops. Sorry – did I put my foot in it?” He slid his left hand under the counter-top and into his trouser pocket. It was irrational and instinctive.

“I’ll let you off, so I will,” she said, leaning back against the counter, arms folded, smiling. “The accents are similar. How did you know?”

“I’ve been there a few times. Derry that is. Work.” The coffee pot gurgled and she filled two mugs, sliding one of them across the bar.

“Would you like a dash of the Irish in there?”

He grinned wickedly. “I make it a rule never to drink before twelve.”

“It’s quarter to. I won’t tell anyone.” The broad smile he saw on the beach was there again. She plucked a bottle of Jameson’s from under the counter and splashed some into each mug, then walked round and sat on a stool next to him. He noticed a thin gold necklace was her only visible jewellery, the pendant, if any, tucked inside her tee-shirt. “Slainte. So, you’ll be a tourist?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Just a guess. The Beachcomber’s pretty well known around here. A local would know it was shut. You here by yourself?”

“Yes. I rented a cottage just around the bay. No sea view but it’s clean and tidy and handy for all amenities.”

“You mean the pub?” She was flirting with him and he loved it.

“Quite.” He raised his mug and took another swig.

“Nothin’s very far away on the Isle of Wight.”

“Yes. Haven’t needed the car. I’ve done more walking here in a few days than I’ve done in years back home.”

“And where’s that?”

“Village near Oxford. Milton Aston.” The whiskey-laced coffee burned deliciously in his throat and a mellow calmness descended over him. He mused how alcohol could so easily put the world to rights, if only for a short time before the inevitable payback. But she was asking all the questions and he, providing all the answers.

“So how did you get from Donegal to the Isle of Wight?” She looked suddenly guarded, as if considering the question carefully.

“Oh, you know,” she said with a shrug, splashing another shot of Jameson’s into his mug. “Life. Circumstances. Decisions. It’s a long story.” She clearly wanted to draw a line, but Jack Fleming was fortified and if not yet fearless, emboldened enough to persist. He found her apparent reticence, however slight or imagined, mildly provocative. He’d already noticed the absence of rings. It meant nothing in itself; she may just have been someone who took them off before going for a walk along the beach, or perhaps had forgotten to put them on? Or maybe had a partner but wasn’t married? He glanced around. The place was minimalist and spotless, despite the dog. There was no evidence of family. No piles of coats on the coatrack by the door, no collection of boots in the tray.

“And you live here alone?” Even in his mild state of inebriation, it sounded impertinent. But he’d said it now and he didn’t care.

“No.” She looked up in mock surprise. “I’ve got Jerry.” She was looking straight at him, flirting again.

“I see.”

“How long are you here for?” she asked, neatly switching the dynamics of the conversation again. As far as Jack was concerned, he would answer any and all questions if it meant he could keep looking at her for the rest of the day. He desperately wanted to know more about her but for now was content to prolong the discussion for as long as possible.

“Just a couple more days. I go back on Friday.”

“Back to work?”

“No. I’m actually unemployed, you might say.”

“Is that right?”

“I had a business, but I sold it. One of the reasons I’m here is to figure out what to do next.”

“And have you?”

“Nope.”

She tilted her head and studied him closely. She was immensely attractive. He tried to tell himself that was the whiskey; he should be careful and behave himself, but he wasn’t listening. “I’m sure you will. People who’ve run their own business and devoted all that time and effort buildin’ it up and makin’ it a success will always find somethin’ else to put their minds and their talents to, so they will. I assume you were a successful businessman?”

He shrugged. “I suppose.” It was no false modesty. Success had come at a price and he couldn’t be sure the sacrifice had been worth it. But then he’d never set out to conquer the world. He’d just taken it step by step, been drawn in until his business had assumed a momentum of its own and carried him along with it. But the professional triumph had been matched with personal failure in equal measure. He’d never imagined it would end the way it did. He met her gaze. “You sound like you have some knowledge of private enterprise.”

“Not really. It’s just common sense, so it is.” She’d sidestepped the implied question again, but either by accident or design, it made her even more alluring. “Do you want another wee dram?”

“No.” He lied. *Best stay in control of yourself Jack.*

She looked at her watch. “Well, I need to take Jerry for a jab at the V-E-T.”

Jack Fleming came back to earth with a thud. People had lives to lead just like him. He was being dismissed. “Of course.” She showed him down the corridor to the front door. “Thanks for the coffee and the legendary Irish hospitality.”

“Just wanted to make sure you didn’t have concussion.” She leaned against the wall, arms folded, and he felt her watching him as he threw on his jacket; dispassionate and inscrutable yet clearly interested. He wondered if the Irish hospitality coursing through his veins was making him think so. Whatever it was doing to him, he knew he had nothing to lose.

“Another question. As a local.”

“And what’s that?” She looked relaxed. She was practised at avoiding questions so it would hold no fear.

“I was planning to have dinner at the *Ristorante A Capella* this evening. Wondered if you could recommend it?”

“I know of it, but I haven’t been there. I tend to stay in at night.”

He stifled the urge to cheer out loud. She lived alone with Jerry. “Well, then. Perhaps I could persuade you to join me for dinner? We can both discover its charms.” He realised his heart was thumping like a teenager’s asking a girl for the first dance at the school ball, taking one of the biggest risks of his life; rejection. She hesitated and remained still, arms folded, neither fidgeting nor squirming nor searching for an excuse. Just coming to a decision. He knew nothing about her but had already concluded she was straight forward and matter of fact. The refusal would be brutal, but honest.

“Will your wife be joinin’ us?” There was neither anger nor suspicion nor smugness in her tone, just a simple question, simply put. She’d seen the ring. He needed that other drink now, but it was too late. It was payback time. He felt the heat rise up his neck as he slowly drew his left hand out of his pocket and swivelled it, examining the gold band, searching for the right words.



“No. But would you believe me if I said I’m no longer married? I just haven’t got used to it yet.” It was no lie, but only he knew that. She made him wait. Five seconds. Five, agonising, gut-wrenching, miserable seconds until he felt he would burst with shame.

“Okay. That would be nice.”

“Great.” He thought his voice might have betrayed the vaguest semblance of a squeak and he cleared his throat manly. “I’ll book a table for seven?”

“Fine.”

“I’ll drop by and pick you up.”

“Better I meet you there.” She would set the terms. There was no room for debate.

“Alright. See you there then. Thanks for the coffee and the er...”

“You’re welcome.”

He slipped into his boots and took two steps up the drive before turning abruptly. She was leaning against the doorframe, still watching him, arms still folded.

“I don’t know your name,” he said.

“I don’t know yours.”

“Jack.”

“Siobhán.”

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