

A Reservoir of Lies  
by  
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## Prologue

The Glock 17 semi-automatic sat snug in its holster, ready. Having completed firearms training at the Met Police Specialist Training Centre in Kent, DI Nick Walker was now authorised to use the weapon.

Two weeks previously, a tip-off had come through to the Flying Squad that the Oxford Street branch of HSBC Bank was being targeted, and surveillance had been put in place. It was July, and the influx of summer tourists meant doubling the routine cash delivery to £500,000. In recent days members of a notorious South London gang had been spotted in the vicinity, and an early morning nod to the operations room at New Scotland Yard confirmed that the raid was on. Intelligence verified that the gang would be armed. The cash was scheduled for a late evening drop off.

At Oxford Circus, the usual rush hour traffic was subsiding, and the last office workers were heading for the tube. Nevertheless, on Oxford Street and around Fitzrovia it was still crowded with shoppers mooching about Topshop, Gap, H&M and other retail outlets near the bank.

Parked in a lane adjacent, for over three hours, a Silver Grey BMW 5 area car was waiting. In the rear, Nick was squeezed up beside DI Mike Barnes, a large Yorkshireman with a liking for junk food, craft beer and cricket. Nick's broad shoulders and athletic physique, had made the hours sweaty and uncomfortable. Slumped in the driver's seat was DS Jim Bree and beside him DI Parveer Singh, leader of the unit.

Of the four officers, Nick was the youngest. He glanced at his Hugo Boss chronograph, an expensive birthday gift from Emer, his girlfriend of nearly a decade. He had no idea of the cost nor was he interested. It was 20.16. The light was fading.

'Your first shout eh, Walker?' Mike Barnes took the final bite of his Big Mac, scrunched up the wrapper and chucked it with the rest of coffee cups and cartons littering the floor.

'I had a few at Saville Row,' Nick replied casually. He was feeling tense but refused to show it.

'With The Squad.' Jim Bree pitched in shoving a stick of gum in his mouth as he spoke.

'How ya finding it?' said Parveer more kindly.

'Yeah. Good.'

'Think you've got what it takes?' dared Barnes.

'Not up to me. My secondment's up at the end of the month. So I guess I'll know then. If not, I'll go back to Saville Row.'

'Easy as that!' Jim gave a sarcastic whistle and winked at Mike. 'Not what you know, eh Mike?'

There was an icy pause.

'What are you saying?' Nick wasn't going to be intimidated. He was the youngest DI at West End Central, but he had earned his position and his secondment to the Flying Squad through hard work.

Mike took a long noisy suck of his chocolate milkshake then answered.

'Your old man was the 'legendary' DI Frank Walker. He knew people in high places. In the days when a funny handshake meant something. Maybe you had a helping hand?'

Nick stayed silent. He pulled out his smartphone and went to the map app.

Mike tried again. 'Whatever happened to him?'

'He died. It was an accident.' The young detective remained calm and put the post code of the bank into the search bar.

'Not what I heard.' Mike adjusted the straw. 'Your old man sailed close to the wind.'

Nick smiled to himself without answering. Had he not been sat in the area car, he would be out on the water at the King George Sailing Club where when he had any downtime, he enjoyed speeding across the large Lea Valley reservoir on his high-spec windsurf board.

Mike gave it one more try. 'Maybe your old man was taken-out. Killed?'

Nick emerged from his daydream and stared at the fat man beside him. He'd heard the lies and innuendo before.

'My dad lived dangerously. I've heard that. But I also heard he was one of the finest coppers who ever served the Met.' Nick went back to the map of the area on his phone.

'Yeah? Well, we'll see if you've got his balls, eh?' Mike took a last suck of his shake.

'Hey! Give the lad a break.' Parveer Singh interjected.

Nick shrugged. He turned to the map of where they were staking out.

The bank was on a block bordered by Oxford Street to the south, Market Place to the north, Great Portland Street to the west, with Market Court, an alleyway down the side of the bank, to the east.

Nick wondered from which direction the attack would come when suddenly a burst of static sounded in the earpieces of all the officers. He pocketed his phone.

'Control to all units. Stand by!' It was Central Operations Command at New

Scotland Yard.

'Here we go!' Jim Bree said straightening up.

The G4S security van containing over £500,000 was approaching from the north, heading south, down Great Portland Street en route to the bank with an ETA of four minutes. Hidden close by were at least three other unmarked vehicles, and stationed on roofs and garages, a heavily armed team of SWAT officers ready to pounce.

In the BMW the four detectives continued to listen to the commentary. The van was seconds away, approaching Market Place ready to turn left where it would pull up at the rear of the bank. Nick adjusted his position in the car. Through the front window, he could see the rear door of the bank and the wide alleyway down the side leading out onto Oxford Street.

'Stick to the briefing,' said Parveer Singh. 'Until the guards are out, and there's a Go-Go. Hold your positions.' He finished speaking as the security van appeared at the far end of the lane. Nick and the others watched. One guard got out and went to the back, while another released the van door from inside. The guard retrieved one large cash case and carried it to the rear door of the bank. A bank employee was there to open up from inside, and the guard delivered the case.

'How many cases?' whispered Jim Bree.

'Four' said Nick. '125K in each.'

The detectives watched as two others were delivered.

'Looks as if it's a stand down. There's no movement,' Mike said sitting back.

The rest stayed focused.

It was when the last case was being carried from the van to the bank, that two black Range Rovers sped in from either end of the street without warning. The cars mounted the pavement, blocking the security van from moving, and hemming in the rear door of the bank.

'Fuck! We're on!' said Jim, excited.

'Hold your positions.'

It was Central Ops in their earpieces.

As the command came through Nick, Parv, Jim and Mike could see movement on the far side of the Range Rovers. Four figures wearing full-face visored black motorcycle helmets leaped out of the vehicles and made for the bank. Each had a gun.

'They're tooled up!' Mike said reaching for the Glock in his shoulder holster.

'Silver Shadow Gilboas.' Jim knew his guns.

Nick could just make out the short nose Israeli assault pistols the gang were

waving. He too reached for his Glock, as did Jim and Parv.

Jim was getting twitchy. 'Are we going to get the Go-Go or what?'

Central Ops had read Jim's mind.

'Four-Five to all units! Go, Go, Go!' came the shout through their earpieces.

Parv put his foot down. The BMW surged forward out of the lane, skidding to a halt by the security van.

Nick and Jim piled out on one side, Mike on the other, only to find the gang's hefty Range Rovers jammed against the security van and their way blocked.

Inside the bank Nick could see the robbers hounding the guards and bank workers with their weapons, forcing them to hand over the cash boxes.

Then there was a sound. The loud and throaty roar of powerful motorcycles. Nick craned his head. Down the alleyway, he could just see four powerful red Ducatis arriving out of the crowd on Oxford Street and swarming around the front door of the bank.

Nick didn't wait. He vaulted over the front of a Range Rover.

Parv turned to Jim.

'Get after him!' he ordered. Then grabbed Mike.

'We'll head 'em off!' He was already jumping into the driver's seat of the car. Mike fell into the front seat next to him. The BMW sped off towards Great Portland Street.

The thieves had burst open the side and front doors of the bank and clutching a cash box in one hand and a gun in the other they were running out to meet the roaring machines.

By now Nick was dashing down the alley. Ahead, he could see the helmeted robbers leaping on to the rear of the waiting bikes. He raised his Glock and shouted.

'Armed Police! Stop! Drop your weapons!'

The warning was futile against the noise of the revving engines.

Then Jim arrived. Without waiting he raised his gun and fired off three shots. Each narrowly missed the two riders of the nearest bike.

'Fuck! What are you doing?' shouted Nick. 'This is a job for the SWAT boys now, isn't it?'

Jim had no time to answer. The pillion on the bike was blasting back a hail of bullets from his Gilboa assault pistol. The two detectives dived for cover.

As bullets buried themselves in a wall nearby, Jim leaned into his young teammate.

'So. Not got the balls for this then, Walker?' He sneered.

The remark stung. Nick looked up. The smell of cordite filled his nostrils. The bikes were escaping. Two, making off down Oxford Street towards Tottenham Court

Road swerving around buses and taxis. The other two, were struggling through the retreating crowds. Traffic approaching from Regent Street and Oxford Circus was also slowing the bikes' progress. Nick calculated, if he acted quickly, he could stop at least one of them. Clutching his gun he ran for the closest bike. As he did, the driver spun his machine around and from the rear seat the pillion let off a burst of deadly gunfire. Nick pinned himself to the bank's wall only just avoiding the ammunition spraying all around him. Then calmly, he relaxed. He aimed his Glock and fired.

The MPC training paid off. Two bullets slammed into the gunman's shoulder. But the bike continued to rotate in an effort to get away. Nick fired again. The pillion took two more in the back.

The impact caused the thief to tumble off the bike. His gun and the cash-box he was holding, also crashed to the ground. Battling to retain control, the driver at last, steadied his machine, as he did, his helmeted head snapped around. Through the smoked black plastic visor, Nick could feel an icy stare piercing hatefully out. Then below the helmet and above the black leather jacket, he noticed something on the rider's bare neck. A distinctive six-inch diagonal scar. Suddenly, the hairs on Nick's body stood to attention. Was this a premonition? A moment that would affect his career and future? Should he stop or go on?

Police Incident Response Vehicles were arriving from Regent Street with sirens blaring, screeching to a halt across Oxford Circus blocking the bikers' escape. Their only way out was via Great Portland Street or back towards Nick and Jim. It was then that the second powerful Ducati attacked. Raising his machine-gun the pillion let off more vicious rounds. Diving for cover, Nick managed to protect himself behind a stalled double-decker bus. The firing continued as Jim backed away to the safety of a nearby store.

The gunfire from the second bike had given Scar Neck on the first, time to recover. He skidded up to the discarded cash box containing thousands of pounds. Nick checked his gun. The rider was leaning down, snatching up the box and throttling his bike ready to accelerate away. The second bike with rider, pillion and cash box was turning to follow. It was then that Nick decided to go on.

Using every ounce of energy he ran in pursuit of the raiders. By now, Scar Neck had his money and taking the lead, began to speed off. The second bike followed, weaving through panicking shoppers as he went. Raising his Glock again, Nick took aim at the rear tyre of the trailing bike and fired off multiple shots. The ammunition left his gun as the bike was beginning to vanish around the corner into Great Portland Street. Again he gave chase, hoping to see that his shots had hit home. A split second later, the bike, rider and pillion came into view. Nick watched. Almost in slow-motion, he saw the

impact of his bullets. The bike wobbled, then bounced off a kerb, throwing the rider, pillion, his gun and the cash box, high in the air.

Then Nick noticed the Silver Grey BMW 5 area car with Parv Singh and Mike Barnes blocking the street. Parv had the car between himself and the out-of-control bike and bodies. At that same moment Mike eased himself out of the passenger's seat. He was too late to avoid the oncoming assault. The careering Ducati slammed itself hard into the door, brutally crushing the overweight officer's body, cracking his head between the door and the roof. Killing him instantly.

Nick stopped taking in the chaos until something caught his eye. Scar Neck's Ducati had managed to evade the road block. Clutching the loaded cash-box and disregarding the scattering pedestrians, the rider mounted the pavement, and disappeared at speed off up Great Portland Street. Breathless and frustrated, Nick could only watch.

It was then that Jim Bree ran up to the blood-soaked scene. Nick, standing at the centre of the devastation, ignored him.

## Emer

Lilies always reminded her of death, but they were Mammy's favourite and she knew the flowers would make Mammy happy.

Weeks earlier, during her lunch break from St Michael's Hospital in Edmonton, she had discussed the arrangement with Megan the chatty proprietor of Perfect Petals in Chingford High Street. Although initially the florist had tried to persuade her towards bouquets containing red roses and other blooms usually associated with a fortieth wedding anniversary, she knew the effect she wanted. Only lilies would do. Quickly she decided on Tibetan Snow, a creamy white variety blended with Secret Message, a sun coloured flower. She liked the idea of Sizzle, but these would not be ready until August. The display would be backed with some appropriate shades of green foliage. A little mundane perhaps, but the colour combination which would keep Daddy happy too. The whole deal was done and dusted in less than twenty minutes. She left the shop satisfied. Then having grabbed a crab and rocket on granary from the nearby Pret, she'd jumped into her Sapphire Blue Boxster Convertible and rushed back for another boring financial management meeting.

Now, as the six foot high floral displays were being carried across the perfectly manicured lawn to the large marquee, she knew her instinct had been correct, she could see they were going to look glorious.

The lads from PJ O'Connell Construction had erected the tent over the week. A dozen large tables with an ornate candelabra hanging over each, were arranged around a dance floor in front of a stage big enough to hold Big Tom and The Mainliners, a twelve piece showband that Daddy was flying in from Limerick. On the tables, the caterers had spread crisp Irish linen tablecloths and were only awaiting the floral centrepieces to complement the rest of decorations. When the cutlery and glassware had been added, she would check that the one hundred and fifty or so place names were in the precise order she had stipulated on the table plan.

From the grand patio at the rear of the white painted Georgian mansion, she surveyed the activity with pride. She knew how to organise things. How to make arrangements. Her attention to detail was the one aspect of her personality that everyone complimented her on. Even Mick O'Garvey, who had bounced her on his knee when she was a wee girl, had given her an understated wink as the flowers were being brought in. Occasionally, she suspected some of it was a little backhanded. What they really meant was that she was 'controlling'.

As Senior Nursing Manager at the hospital, she did her best not to micromanage.



She delegated, giving those below her responsibility. She cared for her team and had been promoted for her efforts.

At home with Nick, it was the same. They shared the workload. Even swapping roles from time to time. She was happy to clean and decorate, and he was content to shop. Something she swore she hated doing. This made him laugh, especially when he spotted a new pair of Christian Louboutins or another immaculate Stella McCartney number in her jam packed wardrobe.

"Organised" was how she liked to describe herself, "in mind and body". The gym visits, strict dietary regime and her toned body, were testaments to her words.

Recently she and Nick had moved apartments so as to have a room in which she could keep her clothes. He had argued that they were happy enough at the old place. Then she hinted that if a proposal of marriage were forthcoming she might accept. This of course would mean an extra room for a "his and hers" gym, or even in time, a nursery. Nick fell for it and popped the question. In a Stoke Newington bistro, where they made most of their significant decisions, while she poured herself a second glass of Beaujolais he produced a six diamond engagement ring.

Their day had begun with an email from the pushy Buckhurst Hill estate agent with a follow up call a few minutes later, and suddenly the urgency to agree an offer on the apartment took priority over everything else. The evening ended with the ring back in its box and without Nick getting an answer to his proposal, but with a decision made to buy the apartment.

The new place was modern and spacious. Ideal for two young urban professionals with a dual income and no kids. A 'sophisticated architect designed, three bedroom, two bathroom, luxury apartment with every modern convenience'. Power shower for him, the long desired dressing room for her. Daddy offered to help with the purchase. She had declined.

Then soon after the move, and following a long day of putting furniture in just the right place, the ring reappeared again. She was fitting one of the cushions on their newly acquired sofa when she noticed the box. Nick hadn't given up. He stood over her holding two glasses of champagne with that puppy dog look on his face. She didn't have the heart to refuse and let him slip the ring on her finger. He kissed her gently. With the diamonds glistening, she responded with a nod then a firmer "yes", and he led her to the bedroom. Their lovemaking was more relaxed and blissful than it had been in sometime and although he joked it was probably down to the new pocket-sprung king size mattress, it gave her confidence that their relationship would endure. Nick had presumed she would want to post the news on social-media. She insisted they wait. There was only one time

and place to make the announcement. At the party. She wanted to tell Mammy and Daddy first and thought he would like to let Diana know at the same time. Nick had accepted that seven days was not too long to wait as the people they wanted to tell would all be there. Perfect.

With only hours to go, she was anxious. The ring was safely upstairs in her old childhood bedroom along with her party clothes. From the window she could see the edge of Epping Forest and across the market gardens of The Lea Valley to the vast King George Reservoir and beyond, the sprawl of London in the distance. Above her the July sky was blue with just one or two cotton ball clouds, around her workers continued to attend to the marquee, and gardeners watered the magnificent herbaceous borders edging the acre-sized lawn. She noticed a breeze in the tall trees around the grounds. The wind direction would suit Nick fine. Down at the reservoir if it was reaching gale force 8 he would be able to get his F2 short-board up and planing without much trouble. She smiled as she pictured him hanging from the 6.5 metre sail and speeding over the water. Out there alone in the middle of the 420 acre man-made lake. It was the place he liked to go when he wanted to escape. She respected that. Nevertheless, she worried that he might get distracted by some of the other sailors or surfers who hung around the club and get involved in the chores that came with membership. Nick had recently been re-elected to the committee and seldom said no to club business. She touched the smartphone in her pocket. Should she contact him just to check? No, he was a reliable time keeper, he had to be in his job. Nick's elevation to DI at such a young age proved his ability. She was grateful that his salary was catching up with hers at long last. Although the move from West End Central to Chingford, might be seen as a step down, it would mean more regular hours, less admin and a lot less stress. Nick had taken the 'Oxford Street incident' badly, but now seemed to be coming out of it. A relief.

The Boxster was parked at the front of the house. She decided to pick him up from the club then take him for a light lunch. She'd let him choose. She withdrew the keys from her dainty clutch bag as she heard another car approaching. Way down the tree lined drive she recognised the freshly valeted Meringue White Bentley V8 Coupe cruising towards her. Since he had been able to afford them, Daddy always treated himself to vehicles which would 'cause less trouble than others' and as he had taken a small shareholding in one of North London's Premiership football clubs, he felt he ought to have something which would make an impact. He knew it would give him kudos with the players, and a topic of conversation in the directors box as his knowledge of football was limited. He was aware that the colour and model was ostentatious, but he couldn't care less what anyone thought.

She waited as he pulled up and stepped out. He wasn't looking too bad. The bypass operation of six months ago did not appear to have had much of an impact. She watched him make the effort to straighten up to his full six feet and two inches. He was becoming more conscious of his age. Hated the idea of being old. For at least ten years, his fullish head of hair had retained just enough grey to be plausible. When people suggested he could be anything from a couple of years, to more than a decade less than his actual age, close to 73, he was pleased. He waved to her casually, then removing his Tortoise Shell Ray Ban Wayfarers, ambled over.

'All ready for the hoolie?'

'Nearly there.' She touched his arm gently.

He responded by brushing her cheek with a light kiss. It was something he'd taken to doing since he started to mingle with people who did that sort of thing. She was grateful for the show of affection none the less.

'Well. You've done a grand job so far'. His accent was a distant cousin of the guttural one he had grown up with in Drumshanbo. The one which could still be turned up to ten if needed. Although his voice was still unmistakably that of the mid-west of Ireland, the years of making himself understood, and persuading the English Establishment to entrust much of the maintenance of their country's infrastructure to PJ O'Connell Construction had tempered his brogue considerably. It was now close to that of the acceptable Irish charmers that turn up on television or radio every day of the week. His early years spent travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles enduring back-breaking manual labour was where he learned to adapt. He discovered that how you spoke often told people a lot more about you than you wanted them to know. Yet, he still enjoyed using expressions he recalled from his youth. Keeping the language alive he called it. He had never spoken Gaelic, and could probably only remember a few phrases from his primary school Irish class. But he was loyal to the country of his birth, and proud that he had made the effort to learn all the words of 'The Soldiers Song' in his native tongue. It came in handy at large televised sporting occasions when the Irish National Anthem was likely to be played, and the danger that some conscientious producer or director might pick him out in the crowd.

She glanced over at the car. 'Jimmy not driving you?'

'What? Are you jokin'? I wouldn't let Jimmy do any more than wash and polish my new baby. He can take me in the Merc, or the van, or your Mammy's car when he's togged up. And that's it!'

Jimmy and Mary O'Haragh were Daddy and Mammy's chauffeur and housekeeper. They'd worked for them for more than thirty years. When Daddy bought 'The Big House'

twenty five years ago, they were given the small staff quarters to live in. Board and lodgings, and confidentiality was all part of the arrangement. And Jimmy and Mary were rewarded for it handsomely.

She looked him up and down. His golf shoes, brightly coloured slacks and Lacoste polo shirt gave her the clue.

'Been up to the club?'

'Just the nine holes'

'Did you win?'

'Need you ask?'

He always said that. There was no room for modesty as far as Daddy was concerned, but she had her doubts as to if he had been out at all.

He tapped the breast pocket of his shirt.

'I had a text from Martin. He wants to know what time we're kicking off?'

'Daddy! It was on the invitation. Didn't he read it?' She sighed, then looked at him sternly. 'Don't you know yourself?'

'I was going to ask your Mammy.'

'If Martin had shown a modicum of interest he wouldn't be asking.' Her younger brother was self-centred and only ever did what suited him. The fact that he had bothered to inquire about the occasion at all was at least some relief.

'Ah! Sure that's Martin,' Pat said with a knowing grin. 'He's always up to something to takes his mind off everything else'.

Daddy had always been very forgiving when it came to his eldest son. She knew she would never succeed in convincing him that her brother was anything more dangerous than just a 'bit of a lad'. He had been given various roles in PJOC all with important sounding titles but very little influence. Daddy kept tight control over every aspect of the group. He had his trusted lieutenants, but Martin wasn't one of them.

'I suppose we should be grateful he's even interested.'

'Ah now Emer, if he said he's coming, he'll come.'

Daddy knew how to calm her. When he used her name it reminded her of when she was a little girl. Running to greet him on his return from work. Or when she was older, and they'd meet at the airport on her return from that posh convent school he'd sent her to in County Wicklow. She had mixed feelings about those years. But still, when he said 'Ah now Emer,' it always did the trick and he knew it.

'So? What'll I tell him?'

'Champagne Reception from 6 on. Dinner at 8. Speeches at 9.30. Dancing from 10.'

'I'll tell him 7. That way he'll be here for the grub. And if we're in luck not too scootered.' He was about to take a pace away when he paused. 'Is your Mammy in?'

'She's gone to have her hair done. Daniel's dropped her off. Jimmy's picking her up later.'

'Oh right. Where was Golden Boy off to?'

'Daddy! Why do you keep calling him that? You know he doesn't like it.'

'Ah sure, when you're as brainy as him, you can take a bit of a ribbing,' said Daddy.

Her younger brother Daniel was considered clever, and she was proud of him. His graduation in law with a first-class honours degree the year before had been greeted with great pride by all the family. Even Martin had half-heartedly congratulated him, basking in the reflected glory while dragging Daniel around his regular haunts on a celebratory pub crawl.

Soon after, Daddy's plans for Daniel to join PJOC's legal team were put on hold. Daniel had forgotten to inform everyone that he had volunteered to work with Medecins Sans Frontieres for ten months in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The news was greeted by Mammy with delight. Despite her worries about the dangers her son would face in such a hostile environment, the satisfaction of knowing, that along with Emer, another of her children might follow her into 'the caring profession' filled her with pride. Daniel had even suggested he might go back and study medicine. Something that had certainly put Daddy's nose out of joint. Her father said he admired and loved his youngest son, but something in Daniel's sensitivity appeared to gall him. She could never recall having seen either of them demonstrate any true affection for each other.

Daniel's arrival home from Africa at the beginning of the week was all hugs and kisses, but since then, by all accounts, they had very much dodged one another.

'Maybe Nick'd get him signed up to that sailing club? Get him out from under our feet for a while 'til he sorts out what he's going to do with himself?'

'I'll get Nick to have a word. Anyway, as you were asking, he's gone in to town to pick up his suit and get a new shirt for this evening. 'Something suitable for work in an office, perhaps?' A knowing smile crept across her lips. 'I thought you might like that?'

The response came back cold and fast.

'If he thinks he's going to swan into something cushy at PJOC after his holiday in the sunshine, he's mistaken.'

'Daddy! Have you not looked at his photos? There was nothing cushy about what he was doing. It's horrifying what's going on out there'

'In that case, he should find the wind and rain out on a site for a month or two,

easy.'

She couldn't be bothered to think of a response that wouldn't turn into a row. Instead, she sighed, pointed her key in the direction of her car and pressed the unlock button. The loud 'Beep', and sound of the mechanism in the doors felt like a neat way of saying she had finished the conversation.

'I'm off to surprise Nick with a quick lunch. I'll be back at 5 to check things over and change'.

He nodded, and she headed for the car. He was already walking towards the house as she opened the door. She shouted after him.

'Oh! Daddy if anything comes up, or they need me. Call won't you? No texts please.'

He raised a hand and waved acknowledgement without looking back.

\*

She pulled up. A group of half a dozen men were coming down the steep grass bank of the reservoir. Stepping out of the car and narrowly missing a puddle of water, she focused on the group. Nick was at the centre. One of the others nudged him and he spotted her. He smiled, apologised on her behalf, then strolled over.

'Why do you do it?'

She kissed him full on the lips. 'I like getting policemen into trouble.'

'You'll have to move it.'

'Or what? You'll handcuff me to the bed and interrogate me until I confess to everything?' She put her hand on top of his thigh and slid it higher. She felt him respond. 'I was thinking. I'm not sure we've tested that new mattress enough. We've got a few hours.' She kissed him again. This time flicking her tongue quickly into his mouth.

Nick eased her away gently. 'Hours?'

Not letting him go, she pulled him close again and said, 'Well, there's no breeze. So what else have you got to do before announcing to everyone that you are going to marry – what was it you called me? Oh yes – “The most beautiful woman in the world”'.

He was nearly six inches taller than her. His hair was now a light brown, with blonde streaks which came from spending so much time outdoors. She could feel his toned body through the tee shirt and jeans he had thrown on since his shower and morning sail. Sometimes she felt like a starlet from an old movie being held in the arms of a young Paul Newman or Steve McQueen. He wrinkled his brow and looked down at her with his pale grey eyes. She knew what was coming.

His lips parted and he whispered gently, 'A quick committee meeting. No more than twenty minutes'.

She removed her hands from his buttocks, and thumped him hard on his chest.

'I promise.'

She looked back steely eyed, before adding, 'I thought committee meetings were Tuesdays?'

'It's an emergency. I'll see you back at the flat.'

'Apartment.'

'Apartment,' he tried charm. It was useless.

'So what's the emergency?'

'They might have to drain the lake.'

'Oh?'

'There's a leakage over on the west side bank. We need to decide what strategy to take with the water authority. I thought maybe Pat could advise us?'

'Daddy?'

'Yeah. PJOC have the maintenance contract, don't they'

'Do they? I don't know. The business is none of my business and that's the way I want to keep it.' She could feel irritation creeping into her voice and suppressed it. 'Nick, please. Whatever you do, I don't want you mentioning this to Daddy today. Promise me?'

'But –

'Promise?'

'Alright.' He saw her thaw a little. 'I'll be back at the .... apartment by 2.30. 3 at the very latest. I promise'.

'I wanted to take you to lunch.' She pouted, and stroked his jeans again.

Nick could feel stares from the rest of the committee. He turned to meet them, and nodded.

'I've got to go.' He pecked her briefly. Then just before leaving he lifted her chin and fixed her with his best crinkly grin. 'Why don't you nip into Waitrose and pick us up something that won't stain that mattress too much'.

\*

Pat's coffee was getting cold. He looked around the conservatory. Here and there, there were various plants on stands and small tasteful pictures on the walls. He turned towards the kitchen. Mary was gone. He eased himself out of the chair and carried the cup and saucer through. On the way he passed the small sitting room. The door was ajar.



He spotted a mug that Mary must have missed. He went to pick it up.

He eased open the door, and as he did he noticed a pair of legs. It was a young lad. No more than twenty-five, in labourer's dirty clothes, out sparko on one of the small sofas. He looked at the lad. Did he know him or didn't he? Whether he did or not, the beggar had no right to be lying around the house like that.

Quietly he went to the corner of the room, bent down, raised the edge of the carpet revealing a small safe. Quickly he recalled the four digit combination and spun the lock. Lifting lid he found what he wanted. Inside was a Webley MkVI revolver, and a packet of +P.45 ACP cartridges. The gun was a converted British Service model that Pat had been given to protect himself if it was ever felt necessary. He withdrew the gun and turned to the dozer on the sofa. Clutching the revolver he aimed his toe at the fella's foot and kicked.

'Jesus! What the f -!' The lad shot up and blinked as he found himself staring down the barrel of the gun.

'What are you doing in my house?' said Pat keeping his hand steady.

'I was doing a bit of overtime on the tent and was a bit knackered, like,' the lad was shaking as he spoke.

'And you decided to take a kip on my sofa?'

'Only while I waited, like. I thought I might catch Martin. I needed to have a chat with him.'

'Martin? My son Martin?' He looked at him again. 'Who the fuck are you?'

'I'm Kevin. Your nephew.' He hesitated then went on. 'Mrs O'Connell's cousin Dermott's son. I've been working for you down at the demolition place on the North Circular.'

'Well, Kevin. I've not seen Dermott in years. He bugged off back to Kerry ages ago. And I don't know what you want with Martin. Nor do I give a shit.' Pat pushed the gun closer to the young man's face. 'What I do know is, if your dirty raggedy bones aren't off of my furniture in two seconds, I'll blow your brains out if you have any, then kick your body from here to the other end of tomorrow. Do you understand me?'

Still shaking, Kevin was up from the sofa and halfway down the corridor before he replied. 'Right you are Pat. If you could just let Martin know I'll have it to him soon'.

'It's Mr O'Connell to you.' Pat shouted after him. 'Now fuck off.'

He watched Kevin nod obediently. Then allowed himself a smile. He could still put the fear of God into people. He looked at the unloaded revolver in his hand and had doubts as to its necessity.

As he returned the gun to the safe, on a side table, a photo among all the others



caught his eye. It was one of his favourites. Happy times. Just the three kids. Emer in the middle with her arms around the shoulders of the other two. Martin on the right, Daniel, the Golden Boy on the left. All beaming up into the camera. Taken on that boat he'd hired for their summer holidays. What age were they then? In their teens? Yes, that holiday when they'd flown down to the South of France to get to the boat. Emer had only finished at the convent college in Ireland and Martin was recovering from been slung out of his third boarding school. And Danny Boy had passed, with flying colours, the exam which got him into one of the top private schools in England. He was proud of how they looked, if not all of their achievements.

He lifted the picture. Held it closer. They were handsome children every one of them, but they were a lot older now. Adults. The thought of time passing brought him back to the matter in hand. Who would take over the chair when he retired? It should be one of these three, but which?

The more he thought about it, his best chance was Emer. She had been at that hospital a while now. She was a manager, not anywhere near nursing any more, nowhere near the caring end of the place. She'd said it herself, all she did they days was go to meetings. He would offer her twice the money, shares, and the chance to take the company anywhere she liked. PJOC was not the NHS.

He placed the gold-framed photograph back on the table, as he did so, he heard the sound of the Merc draw up outside. He hesitated for a moment and then decided to go and welcome his wife.

## Party

Chris Walker-Manzi stared at the house from the end of the long drive. 'Creenagh House.' Creenagh? What kind of name was that for a place in England? She didn't get it. Yes, she had Irish blood in her, her mother Geraldine and Aunt Joan were from over there. She had spent some of her summer holidays freezing herself silly on those Atlantic beaches when she was a girl, but in her heart, she knew she was Italian. Hot-blooded and passionate. Her father Raimondo Alfonso Manzi hadn't called their family home anything. It was just 45 Curzon Avenue, that was all – not the name of some poxy little village in Italy where his family had come from.

Chris' husband Andrew trotted across the road having parked their ten year old Toyota people-carrier with the other vehicles in the field reserved for guests. He paused as he pulled the gilt-edged invitation from the breast pocket of his rented black tuxedo and admired his wife.

She was certainly stunning. Tall and dark, with a boyish look but shapely figure. She reminded him of Penelope Cruz or was it, Angelina Joli? Or maybe one of those sexy, dangerous actresses from the early Bond films he'd watched when he was a boy. The days when women in films could get a bloke hard with just one filthy look.

'Andy! Get your arse in gear. Come on!'

He glanced down at the invitation and trotted over.

'We're not too late are we? It says "Champagne reception from six-thirty". It's only seven.'

'Well, if we are. We aren't the only ones,' she nodded at the other couples ahead and behind drifting toward the house. 'Why are you always so edgy around the O'Connells?'

'I'm not. I just don't want any trouble tonight that's all. And don't boss me around.' He walked on briskly.

Chris let out a sigh and followed. He let her catch up.

'If there was any justice my Dad should have a place like this,' she said taking in the Georgian pile ahead.

'Please, Chris. I want to keep in with them. Let's just have a nice party, and not rock the boat. Yeah?' He stretched his hand to take hers. She ignored it.

'That's you all over, "Anything for a quiet life." You never think about what's right and just, do you?' she said bitterly.

'I think about that two hundred grand IT contract coming up and I'm smart enough to know you can blow it for me if you start kicking off, okay?'

She grabbed his hand, pulled him towards her, and kissed him hard. 'I'm sorry Babe. I'll behave.'

Sliding his arm around her shoulder they continued up the long tree-lined drive. 'If you still worked at PJOC you would know what was going on and I might have an even better chance.'

'And if I still worked there I would be coming home every night ready to climb the walls and rip somebody's head off. Yours, most probably. Besides, I still have my ways of getting the inside goss, don't you worry.'

They were approaching the mansion. 'It just makes my blood boil when I see what we could have had. Don't you worry I'm not giving up Andy. I'll never give up 'til I get us something out of this.'

On the top floor of the house, Daniel picked up the black dinner jacket from his bed. He slipped his arms into it then turned to the mirror. The last time he'd worn a jacket of this sort he was severely drunk, enduring the Law Society Graduation Ball in Nottingham. His girlfriend for the night was a mousey English Lit student called Felicity. He wanted to forget it all.

His ten months in Africa had changed everything, and he knew he must soon decide what to do with his life. Just not now. He'd tried to feel comfortable being back in the family home, back in the room they had kept for him, but despite knowing that Mammy's hugs were genuine, he felt stifled. It had only been a week since the welcome at Heathrow, and already he sensed his father's irritation at having him about the place. He told himself that after seeing the hardships suffered in Likouala he should be able to endure an old man's teasing.

Over a pint in the O'Neill's in Waltham Abbey he'd chatted to Martin about it. His brother had only laughed and suggested he should find himself something to do. Get out of the house. Away from Da. He recalled a few friends from Nottingham with jobs in the City and resolved to contact them the following week.

He clipped the functional black tie to his new shirt and listened to the sound of chatter coming from beyond his bedroom window. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. It was Nick.

'Emer's getting twitchy. Are you all right?'

'Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?' Daniel replied. For some reason, he felt threatened.

'I just thought lavish parties and 'no expense spared' might make you feel uncomfortable. I mean, having seen all that stuff out there. So many with so little?'

'Well now that you mention it. You're right, I should probably take a begging bowl around. Embarrass them into forking out. Say a couple of grand a pop?'

Nick looked horrified. Then he spotted a glint in Daniel's eye.

'Joke, right?'

Daniel nodded. 'Emer let me have me all their email addresses. I can knobble them later. Hey, let me just splash on some smelly and I'll be down in a tick'.

'You'd better be. You know what your big sis is like if everything isn't just so, and on schedule.'

'The rest of them here?'

'Not all. Just saw your Aunty Gerry and Uncle Ray go through. And little Lulu. Very tasty. You want to chat her up.'

'My cousin? Nick, shit man!'

'Tasty all the same. Kissing cousins eh?' Nick raised an eyebrow then disappeared off downstairs.

The large garden surrounding the house was filling up. Guests mingled, showing off their finery, being served champagne and canapés by the young catering staff hired for the evening. Daniel's cousin and Chris' 'baby' sister Louise, was amongst them. Although feeling a little nervous, she felt excited too. She looked striking and gorgeous in her low-cut black and white tight-fitting Alexi Dress. She had newly purchased it from Reiss in Lower Regent Street earlier that week. It was the most expensive dress she had ever owned, and this was the first opportunity she had had to show it off. She could only just afford it from the savings she'd scabbled together from her minimum wage job in Edmonton. Beside Louise were her parents. Both clutching glasses of frothing Veuve Clicquot they were doing their best to appear relaxed and comfortable.

Geraldine Manzi nodded and 'helled' at various people to whom she had been introduced on past occasions. Occasions when Pat and Joan had felt it unavoidable not to include her and Ray on their guest list. She was more sensitive to their status as the poor relations than her husband but was determined not to give her sister or Pat O'Connell the satisfaction of letting them know how she felt. Yes, Ray had helped her brother-in-law establish the business which was now worth millions, but that was then and now was now. Her husband had moved on. And so had she. Tonight was for the craic, a chance to eat their food, drink their champagne and anaesthetize herself from any resentment she was feeling.

Louise watched her mother drain her half-full champagne flute and grab another from one of the passing waitresses. She caught her father's eye hoping he would take

charge and not allow the family to be embarrassed as had happened so many times before. Ray looked at his daughter and gave a wry smile. Louise was used to her father's laid back attitude to life. It must be his Mediterranean upbringing, she thought. She decided to keep an eye on her Mum and try to prevent any unpleasantness should it show signs of arising. She sipped her Buck's Fizz for a moment, then scanned the crowd hoping that her sister and brother-in-law would turn up soon.

In the large reception area just beyond the parquet floored hall, Pat and Joan greeted Chris and Andrew warmly. Much to both parties relief, the exchange was polite and friendly. As they made their way out towards the garden Andrew held his wife's hand and whispered in her ear.

'There, that wasn't too much of a chore was it?' he said with affection.

Chris squeezed him back and smiled up at him pleasantly. 'No. Not when I think of the two of them hanging by their bloody nipples from a meat hook, it isn't. I'm gagging for some of that bubbly aren't you?'

'I knew there was a reason I asked you to marry me. Now, what was it? Oh yeah. Your vivid imagination. That's it.'

As Andrew escorted his wife across the large patio and down into the throng below, his mother Diana Walker arrived at the front door. Escorting her was one of her many gentleman friends. On this occasion, it was a retired DI from the Met., Brian Jennings. Jennings, now widowed, had been a bagman for her husband Frank. His crush on Diana went way back to well before Frank died. Days when they all attended the amateur boxing at the Finchley Boys Boxing Club. It was where he'd first set eyes on her. She was a head-turner in those days, and still retained an elegance and aura which attracted admiration. Brian could recall every man in the place wanting to get into the stunning Diana Walker's knickers. Including Pat O'Connell.

Frank was an excellent fund raiser and net-worker, and Pat was astute enough to know that connections in the metropolitan police could only be useful. He and Joan had become close friends of Frank and Diana, so much so, that at one time they had even taken a family holiday together. A Freddie Laker all-inclusive package to Florida. It was where Emer and Nick had first met, and Andrew and Martin had gotten up to all sort of mischief. The details had long since been forgotten by all.

Pat saw Brian before he saw Diana, but Joan had been watching and waiting for her arrival since the first guest crossed their threshold. Nick's mother was always going to be on the list. Emer had insisted. Joan was determined to retain her composure, and

prepared herself for the meeting. Things from the past still rankled. Not enough to let them spoil the occasion, though.

Diana was the first to speak.

'Joan. Patrick. Thank you so much for inviting me,' she said.

Then there were smiles and air kisses, and "Lovely to see you", all round. Then Brian was introduced, acknowledged, and subtly ignored. There was a moment between Pat and Brian when a memory was jogged. But it was all so long ago, and Pat had come so far, that there was little uneasiness on either side.

The two men shook hands, and Diana was about to press Joan for an update on the relationship between their two children when both Nick and Emer emerged from the kitchen.

Emer had changed from her jeans and blouse into a chic Nicole Farhi ribbed dress chosen to show off her figure. Nick appeared suitably dapper in the Boss evening suit Emer had pressed him into purchasing for the occasion. The new shirt and bow tie were cutting into his neck, but he knew he was looking good, and felt the same. The proud mothers beamed as they approached.

Joan was the first to comment.

'Here they are. Don't they both look gorgeous?' she said.

'Sensational!' Diana agreed. She immediately kissed Emer on both cheeks, adding 'I love your dress Emer, exquisite.'

Emer took the compliment as genuine. She thanked Diana quickly, wanting to get on to the matter in hand, but Nick's mother was determined to turn the attention to her son.

'My boy scrubs up well. Don't you Nicholas?' She adjusted his tie slightly.

Emer's proprietorial instincts kicked in and irritation flashed across her face.

Sensing her daughter's annoyance Joan came to the rescue.

'So? Everything is organised is it?'

Emer touched her mother's wrist in gratitude.

'Yes. So far so good.' She took a breath, glimpsed at Nick then went on. 'Well, as you are all here. We have something to tell you. Don't we Nick?'

Nick nodded and smiled waiting for Emer to continue as he suspected she would.

'No. I'm going to let you take the lead on this one PC Plod.' She raised an eyebrow.

The two mothers looked at each other in anticipation. Pat was the next to pipe up.

'Oh come on. Get on with it. After ten years, he's going to make a decent woman of you. Is that it?'

Joan turned on him. 'Oh for God sake Pat! Why did you have to go and ruin it? He

was about to say!

Diana was already whooping for joy and hugged both Emer and Nick in girly delight.

'Come on then. Let's see the ring!' she cried.

Emer pulled off her left satin glove to reveal the sparkling diamond engagement ring Nick had placed on her finger only the week before. As the mothers cooed, both Pat and Brian offered their congratulations to the "condemned man".

Being focused on the happy couple, neither Pat nor Joan saw their eldest son arrive. Martin O'Connell stood at the door and stared. He could read the picture and felt a rush envy sweep over him. All the indicators were there. Pat's warm handshake to Nick, Diana's hug for Emer, Mammy's delighted laughter.

Martin took it all in then leant over to his long-suffering wife Ann and gently patted her slightly swollen stomach.

'Let's see if we can trump Big Sis and her Dopey Dic, shall we?' he whispered.

Ann looked at him innocently, slightly puzzled. 'Oh! Do you think Emer and Nick have got engaged? Blimey, your Ma looks happy.'

'Yeah, well. Our news will make her even happier won't it sweetheart? Now put on your best grin.' He escorted her forward towards his parents.

Joan was the first to spot them.

'Martin! Ann! You'll never guess what's happened?'

'Do you know what, Ma - I reckon I would.' He found it difficult to disguise the sarcasm in his voice, and his mother let him know it.

'Oh you think you're ever so smart don't you.' She turned to Ann giving her a welcoming hug.

'How are you, Ann?' She didn't wait for a reply. 'So aren't you both going to congratulate them?'

Martin butted in quickly before he lost the opportunity.

'Actually Mam, Ann is blooming!' He directed his eye towards Ann's middle and winked at his mother.

It had the desired effect. Joan's jaw dropped and immediately she let out a scream of joy. 'Another Babby!! Oh sure Martin, you're terrible so you are!!'

This would be Martin and Ann's third child in the space of five years. They had left Rosin and Niamh with Ann's sister for the evening promising to pick the girls up before lunch the next day.

Joan was now clapping her hands to attract attention.

'Everyone! Listen now. Martin and Ann have great news. Don't you?'



Emer stopped. Nick could feel her hand tighten on his. She could see Martin pull himself up to his full six foot one inch. The smirk on his face said it all.

'Yes, Ma we do. Ann is in the family way again and I'm so proud of her. Aren't I darling?' He glanced at his wife for an instant, then turned his attention to Emer. He was satisfied to see his sister's jaw tense in frustration.

'But I gather it's celebrations all round tonight? ' He took a pace towards Emer. 'You finally gave in to him did you, Sis?'

Emer held her composure. 'Congratulations Martin, Ann. Yes. Nick asked me to marry him. And as I love him very much, I said yes.'

'Well. Well done!'

Martin grabbed Nick's hand. Shook it firmly.

Pat watched his son and future son-in-law. He knew there was little love lost between the two and looking at Ann, he wondered if she was, actually, pregnant at all. She was such a skinny little thing. He wouldn't have put it past Martin to have made the announcement just to take the wind out of his big sister's sails.

He was contemplating all this when Joan's voice snapped him out of it. 'Pat there are other people to welcome. We'd better leave this lot to look after themselves.'

Pat patted his son on the shoulder as was expected, and went to do his duty.

Emer forever the dutiful daughter picked up her mother's cue and the opportunity to assert her authority again.

'Yes, of course, I'm sure you are all gasping for some refreshment. Shall we?' She grabbed Nick and led the way out to the garden.

Martin let them go, before following with Ann close behind.

The sun was dipping behind the tall, ancient oak trees which surrounded the grounds. The champagne was doing the job it was intended to do. The guests were relaxing and the news of Emer and Nick's engagement was circulating, and she was beginning to wish she had kept it a secret until after the party. The felicitations appeared genuine from most of the guests. Even Chris and Andrew had been kind in what they had said. Aunt Gerry was sweet and Uncle Ray kissed her in that flamboyant way that Italians do. She could see the work she had put into the day was paying off and glanced at her watch. In a few minutes, the Master of Ceremonies would call everyone to their tables as she had planned. Just then there was a tap on her right shoulder. Looking around, she found no one there. With a sigh, she looked left.

'Fall for it every time don't you sis?' Martin was standing beside her. A smug expression on his face.



'I thought you might have grown up by now,' she said.

'No E. Life's too short not to have fun. You should have a laugh sometimes. Which leads me to ask - why on earth are you getting hitched to that loser?'

'Nick - is not - a loser. He works extremely hard, and does something of value.'

'A Plod? He's a pen pusher. He hardly gets out.'

'He's a D I.'

'Yeah, in Chingford. Dropped by the Met. Nick is going backwards E.'

'He wasn't dropped. Nick chose to move.'

'They let him go. And from what I heard he's in reverse gear at his new place too'.

'What would you know Martin? A poor little rich boy who lives off pocket money from Daddy. Couldn't you even make the effort to do a decent day's work for once in your life?'

He maintained his grin. 'I could. But why would I? When it's all coming to me anyway.'

She struggled to maintain her composure. Then remembered that this was what Martin always did when he felt vulnerable. He attacked. Got his retaliation in first. She decided to ignore him.

'Martin. I'm sure one day all this will be yours. But as Daddy and Mammy appear to be in rude health, I fear that day will be a long time coming. Now I must go and find Nick before we all take our seats.'

Emer stalked away leaving Martin to turn his attentions elsewhere. He was determined to amuse himself. Ann was gassing to some other 'Housewife of Chingford' about the top primary schools in the area. This would keep her occupied and out of his hair for a while at least. Through the crowd, his gaze settled on the shapely form of Louise. It had been some time since he had seen her, suddenly she looked like a prospect worth pursuing. He ambled over. Did his tap on the shoulder routine again. It worked.

She turned looking a little flustered.

'Hello Lou,' he purred.

'Oh it's you Martin!' she giggled.

'And who were you expecting? You didn't bring a date with you. I checked the guest list'.

'Oh, just Dan. He's gone to get me a cranberry juice'.

'Dan the Cran Man, eh? You're not drinking the Champoo?' He had begun to leer down the front of her low cut dress. 'I have to say you are looking fucking ravishing this evening. Has anyone offered to ravish you yet?'

She giggled again. 'Not so far. Are you offering?'

He raised his eyes to hers. 'I'm a married man. You know that..'

'It never stopped you before. Is what I heard.'

'Gossip. You want to let me take you out sometime. Test out the theory?'

'I might just do that,' she said provocatively.

They held each other's gaze, until from the corner of his eye Martin saw his brother approaching.

'Here comes the waiter with your juice.' He turned to Daniel. 'Alright, Danny boy? I like your style. I could fix you up behind the bar at The Pink Martini, you'd be great.'

Dan handed Louise her drink, then laughed. 'Don't think so Bro. I wouldn't work for you, even if you paid me. Which I'll bet you'd try to avoid doing anyway.'

Martin slung his arm over Daniel's shoulder and pulled him close. 'Oh don't be like that. Tell you what. Don't tell Da, but how about after this I show you my new place? You'll love it. Lou here wants to come. Don't you Lulu?'

Louise shook her head. 'No' she said firmly. 'I promised my Dad I'd help get Mum home.'

'Aw that's a pity. Looks like it's just you and me then bro'.

'Let's see how the rest of the evening goes first, shall we? Speaking of which – ' Daniel nodded towards the entrance to the marquee where the Master of Ceremonies was clearing his throat.

'My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen!' he announced at the top of his voice. 'Would you all please make your way to your seats. Dinner is about to be served'.

A spontaneous cheer came from the crowd, and they began to drift to their places.

The guests consumed the five-course meal and many bottles of fine wines amid chatter, laughter, more gossip and speculation as to what Pat might say in his speech. As coffee was being poured, once again the Master of Ceremonies called for attention tapping a spoon against an empty crystal glass.

Pat readied himself.

'My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen. Please pray silence for Mr Patrick Joseph O'Connell.'

The applause was loud and warm, and there were shouts, hollers and whistles from all corners. Pat stood, taking his time to pull the carefully prepared prompt cards from his breast pocket.

At the main table, Martin O'Connell stood showing his appreciation making sure his father didn't miss him. On the other side of the table, Emer and Nick applauded affectionately without the need to draw attention to themselves.

Pat placed the notes on the table in front of him then raised his hands to calm his many admirers. As the clapping faded, he didn't notice that in some quarters the enthusiasm was less than genuine.

Chris quietly leant towards her husband. 'Pass me that bottle Andy, before Mum finishes it. Oh, and a set of earplugs if you've brought some. I can do without hearing the Great 'I Am' tell us how brilliant he and his family are.'

Andrew Walker smirked and did as he was told.

Pat began with a few jokes before acknowledging the 'very special guests' who he was glad to see had returned from vacations around the world to join in the celebrations. He then turned his attention to Emer.

'I think we can all agree that Emer has proved today what an excellent organizer and manager she is. I'm sure Nick will be reassured that their forthcoming - and no doubt very expensive - wedding will go without a hitch.'

This generated another show of appreciation from the guests. Pat took advantage of it.

'For me, it's great to know that her mother's capacity for making things run smoothly has been passed down a generation, and I'm hoping it won't be long before our beautiful daughter's talents can be utilized in other ways.'

Emer glanced at Nick wondering what was coming.

Pat went on. 'As many of you will have heard. A some months back I had a bit of trouble with the old ticker, and the quack has me on strict orders to only bother the missus once a night, rather than the usual half a dozen times. He advised me to slow down in other ways too. So, I'm cutting down on the booze, I've chucked out the Havanas, and I'm only going into the office for eight hours a day. Nevertheless, I'm sure those of you with an interest in our company will be asking yourselves - what about when he gets old?' Pat gave a laugh, then continued.

'I can only reassure you all that we are not only consolidating our present and past successes, but we have very exciting plans for the future. Plans which will take PJOC from being one of the top construction groups in Europe and shape us into the truly global brand we deserve to be. I am equally confident I will have no difficulty in persuading Emer to help me out, be at the heart of those plans, and play a significant role in achieving these goals.'

Emer nodded and maintained her smile, not wishing to give any indication of the fury she was feeling inside. What the hell was Daddy up to?! She was proud of her independence. She had no intention of moving from her management job at the hospital

to join PJOC. Besides, this evening was to be a celebration of a marriage. Not of his business. She could see Mammy as serene as ever, gazing up at Daddy. How did she do it?

Joan had expected something like this. She knew that Pat was incapable of keeping to the point. Everything was about business. It always was and it always would be.

At the other end of the table, Martin had no idea what his mother or sister were thinking. Nor did he care. All he knew was, that this was a smack in the face and a hard one at that. His loyalty was being brushed aside. What was the old man playing at? Grovelling to Emer like that? And what was a 'significant role' anyway? He wouldn't be taking this lying down.

At the Manzi table Chris Manzi-Walker dug her nails into her palms. The thought of that smartass Emer O'Connell joining PJOC could only mean one thing – Pat had no intention of keeping his promise to her father and her family. The arrival of that cocky bitch at PJOC could mean trouble. She would have to make sure her contacts on the inside kept their eyes and ears open.

Chris' mother Geraldine leaned over to her husband, 'I don't know how that sister of mine puts up with that Gombeen Man. He thinks he's so wonderful, but he's just like the rest of us, a culchi from the bogs. One who got lucky.'

Ray smiled at his wife. 'I can't make out what you're saying Gerry, but let's just have a nice time. I know you think if an Irish party doesn't end in a fight then it wasn't worth coming, but let's make tonight different, eh?' He poured his wife a glass of water and pushed it in her direction.

Gerry ignored it. She picked up the half-full bottle of Sancerre from the wine cooler and topped up her glass.

Ray glanced over at Louise and raised an eyebrow. His youngest daughter nodded in response. She would have to keep a close eye on her mother.

The favourable smattering of applause from those that mattered demonstrated to Pat that the idea of Emer as part of PJOC was popular. A murmur spread around the room, but he was cute enough to get back quickly to the main point of the evening. 'Mammy', or 'Ma'. As his kids liked to call her.

'I can hardly believe it's forty years since my gorgeous wife and I were married in St Mary's in Camden Town. It seems like only last Wednesday when we were prancing around like the couple of frisky colts we once saw in a field just outside Kilkenny. I seem to remember we splashed out and bought them. One later went on to romp home in the

Cheltenham Gold Cup, in the early 1990s, the other filled a pot in some glue factory up north.'

Joan smiled warmly. She vaguely remembered the horses and supposed the story was true. They did have some fun times together.

Pat went on. He thanked his wife for helping him with the early days of the business. And for raising three fine children, Emer, Martin and Daniel. He paused briefly and scanned the marquee. 'I'm sure all of you with kids, will understand when I say that sometimes this can be one of the most challenging jobs in the world. Especially, when one of you has their mind elsewhere. How my wonderful wife Joan coped at those difficult times and without any complaint, I will never know. And for this, I am eternally grateful to her.'

All eyes were on Joan. Not least those of Diana Walker, who was watching for any sign of the truth. Her husband Frank Walker had been close to Pat and she knew things weren't as blissful as Pat was making out. Joan was not quite the meek and mild little home-maker she was being portrayed as.

Ray Manzi also had his eye on Joan convinced she glanced in his direction at this point in her husband's eulogy.

Pat continued by mentioning Martin and Ann's children, Niamh and Rosin. He quickly complimented the couple on raising such 'grand grand-kids'. Joan led a round of applause, and Martin stood to take an ostentatious bow. A nudge from his mother prompted him to remember his shy and retiring wife. Ann was reluctantly dragged to her feet while Martin waited for Pat to announce Ann's reported pregnancy. There was no reference. Martin put it on the list of things he would have a word with his Da about later.

Pat wrapped up his speech by asking Joan to stand. Taking his wife's hand he gazed into her eyes and recited a poem he had unearthed years earlier and learned by heart for their thirtieth anniversary -

One by one each year has flown by  
since we both said "I do"...  
Forty years of memories,  
shared by just us two.  
From big events and holidays  
to simple daily pleasures,  
Some tearful times along life's way,  
some joys that can't be measured...  
One by one each year now gone,  
but still they're ours forever...

Each and every memory,  
of Forty years together!

During the reading, Joan was a muddle of emotions. She had been with this man almost all her life. For how much longer, she was unsure.

Pat came to the last line and as did he bent forward held his wife in his arms and declared his love.

'I love you Joannie Girl' he said. Then kissed her tenderly on the lips.

Once again there was more rapturous applause. When it had died, Joan turned confidently to make her own short speech of thanks. She didn't dwell on her children but singled out Daniel. She said how proud she was of the work he had been doing in Africa and how pleased she was to have her youngest son back home safe and sound. Then directed herself to her sister Gerry's table.

'My beloved sister Geraldine is here today with her lovely husband Raimondo and their family.'

Gerry although on the way to being very drunk, stopped. Ray put his hand gently in his wife's as a precaution. Louise, Chris and Andrew who were at the same table, waited in anticipation for what was about to be said.

'Gerry. It's a long time since the two of us arrived over here like something out of a Maeve Binchy. All starry-eyed with no idea what would happen, but ready for anything. Two young fillies over from County Kerry thinking the streets would be paved with gold. We're both a lot older now, but I hope you'll always remember, I'm your sister. I'm here for you. If you ever need anything at all.'

Ray and his daughters watched their mother closely. Ray could feel her grip tighten around his. Gerry straightened. She was inebriated. She couldn't even pronounce the word, but she was determined to maintain her dignity nevertheless. She knew that most of the guests were waiting for some kind of melodramatic outburst. Well, fuck 'em. On this occasion, it wasn't going to happen. She took a breath, smiled, gave a bright wave of thanks and blew a kiss to her sister. She managed to give the impression that her gesture was genuine. And perhaps it was. She was confused. What was that big sister of hers trying to do? Tick her off, console her, offer her refuge, pity her for not being as wealthy or successful, or apologise for how things had turned out between their families? At that moment, no matter how hard she tried, she could not figure it out. All she knew was that her sister's speech had provoked the tears that were now trickling down her face. Damn it.

Joan's public display of affection towards her sister was calculated. She had become convinced that despite Pat's declaration of love, he believed she was beholden only to him and had no other life outside the world of Patrick Joseph O'Connell. Well, she was still Joan Grimes underneath. She had had a life before him, but there was other family she could turn to if ever the need arose. And for the time being, she would maintain the charade. She reached out to Pat and brought him to his feet.

'Pat O'Connell. We have been married for forty years and going steady since that day when you almost tipped a pint of Guinness over me at The Forum Dance Hall way back whenever it was. So. I'd better give you a kiss and say I love you. Then we can all get on with the proper business of the night. Big Tom is waiting.' She raised her glass. 'To my husband Patrick. May your ticker keep ticking.'

Pat held his wife close. Both were aware of how fragile their marriage had become. But deep in both their hearts they knew they had always been stronger together than apart. That knowledge caused them to smile lovingly at each other. They kissed once more. Then on cue, Big Tom and his Mainliners launched into their rendition of 'For They Are Jolly Good Fellows'.

The ovation and sing-along was loud and enthusiastic.

As Pat twirled his wife around the dance floor like in the old days, there were cheers, from almost everyone.

