

Kin

He stood tall in his new vestments and surveyed the rogue's gallery from his elevated position on the high altar. The usual smell of damp and old wood was heavily disguised by the lingering fragrance from the flower arrangements decorating the old church. He gave his two delinquent alter boys the evil eye and left their behaviour to be monitored by his other server father Stephen. The twin boys were part of today's event and members of the parker dynasty.

Father Benedict waited for his presence to be noticed and the whispering hush died down. He was about to begin the service, when the clattering of heels announced a mini skirted teenager. She was working her way to the front of the church, and excusing herself into one of the front pews followed by three burley young brothers. The priest's immediate thought was Jailbait! Portrayed in the innocence of beauty and youth. Every red-blooded male in the congregation noticed, he even felt a momentary stirring himself. Thankfully her three brothers ensured nobody's eyes lingered too long.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate an exceptional event, fifty years of marriage between, Daisy Jane parker and Joseph George Parker who were childhood sweethearts. Nearly every person in this congregation has a family connection to this remarkable couple, whether it is direct or indirect descendant, or part of the many extended families amongst you all. So would you all please turn to the back and welcome Mr and Mrs Parker who are here to start their celebrations with the churches blessings."

Everyone turned to witness the sprightly seventy year olds walk down the aisle, as the organ began to play "Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do." The couple smiled and nodded as they passed and surveyed their gathered clan, the king and queen of all the family. They now headed a multimillion-pound empire. Daisy had stated she wanted their own eight children seated at the front, then their partners and children behind. Other relatives could sit wherever they wanted.

Father Benedict knew the brothers and sisters did not always see eye-to-eye, because one of the sisters was a good catholic and very often confessed many of the disagreements to him as she asked for absolution, She was Mary O'Brien (nee parker) the eldest daughter and the only, still practicing catholic. She was also the one who suggested that her parents go for the church blessing; she was instrumental in organising this family gathering. She had confessed that she was worried there would be arguments, once the alcohol is part of the equation.

Father Benedict made the sign of the cross and said; "Let us pray" Mary O'Brien blessed herself, fell to her knees and lowered her head. "Holy Mary Mother of God, please don't let Patrick get drunk and don't let him kick off and ruin Mummy and Daddy's big day. I promise to donate a thousand pounds to the African babies fund, if you'll just let it be a good day. Glory be to the father." She blessed herself again, and then did it once more for luck. "Amen."

There was a very loud cracking sound from the back of the church, the door was wide open, sun streamed into the dimly lit church and Mary noticed a figure running down

the path away from the building and out into the crowded street.

“Mother of God” shouted father Benedict and fell forward over the alter. A red stain was seeping out over the white alter cloth.

Daisy drew closer to Joseph, who put his arm around her; they were frozen to the spot. The mini skirted teenager was the first to take action.

“Well don’t all just stand there you old dotes, do something can’t you!” she took out her mobile phone and dialled 999.

“There’s been a shooting at the holy cross church, it’s the priest, and yes he might be dead, I don’t know. He needs an ambulance and you had better get the Old bill round here, these old idiots seem to be rooted to the spot.”

“And we’ll have less cheek from you young madam,” Said Mary O’Brien, you pay respect to you elders and betters or I’ll skin the hide off you and no mistake.”

“Oh shut you face, you old slag.” Said the girl, who was feeling very important since she was the one to alert the authorities.

“Now we’ll have no more of that kind of talk in God’s house, that’s for sure.”

People had now started to move around, father Stephen surprised himself with his authority. The police will be here in a moment and no one must leave the building, the priest needs all the peace and quiet he can get. Father Stephen was leaning over the recumbent form of Father Benedict Whose blood was spreading over the alter.

“I knew there’d be trouble if this lot got together” Whispered Shaun O’Brien, “But I didn’t think they would bloody well kill the priest.” He wanted a cigarette, he had not wanted to come to the service, he was feeling irritable, and he wanted to get down to the pub.

“It’s a load of hypocrisy, if you ask me” Said Shaun to his wife that morning.

“Well no one is asking you, so shut up and do what is expected of you, get your coat on and behave; I don’t want any trouble from you once you get the drink inside you.”

Shaun knew that his wife’s word was law and said no more.

“This is my mothers big day – she didn’t get Joseph down the aisle the first time, so she needs a second chance.” Said Mary in her most serious voice.

“What in heavens name do you mean woman? Didn’t get him down the aisle the first time! What are you saying?”

“What I mean Shaun, don’t you ever breath a word of this to a living soul; or I’ll personally fix it so you burn in hell; What I mean is, on her wedding day, it wasn’t Joseph waiting for her at the alter, it was his friend Declan. Joseph had got a drink too many inside him the night before; he was too drunk the next morning to be at the

church. In fact he was still sleeping it off in a hedge on his wedding day.”

“So are you telling me Daisy never married Joseph-is that what you are telling me?”

“Well yes, he meant to be there but he wasn’t, he sort of had a deputy, stand in like. Only at the altar that is, he got along later for the reception, but no one noticed the difference by then.”

“So if that’s the way of it then you’re not legally a rich heiress then are you?”

“Well now you put it like that” Said Mary, “I guess I’m not.”

“Shit what a bloody mess” Said Shaun

Suddenly father benedict moved his arm. People began to cross themselves and pray. Mary O’Brien, once again fell to her knees. One woman began to scream, “It’s a miracle”

At that moment the paramedics arrived and gave the priest oxygen. He was placed on a stretcher and then sped away from the church in an ambulance. The policemen came into the church. One approached father Stephen and said “Did you see anything father?”

“No Sir, I did not,” Said the befuddled Stephen.

“I did” Shouted Mary, “I saw someone run out of the church, just as we had begun to pray and just after father Benedict was shot”

Detective sergeant Patrick Candy was a distinguished looking man. His mysterious dark brown eyes glistened in the sunlight that radiated through the stain glass window. The beams of light cast speckles of translucent colour on his navy blue pinstripe suit. He was slow to approach the crime scene as he absorbed every detail in the church. He removed his glasses from his top pocket and placed them on his face.

“Can we ask these people to not touch anything and gather on the far side of the nave.” He whispered this into the ear of the nearby PC. “As they could disturb vital evidence and it would be a bloody nightmare.”

The PC cleared his throat and announced that although no one was to leave, could they all congregate on the right hand side of the church. That seemed to do it. People’s names and address’s were taken one by one and then they were aloud to leave.

Patrick while pacing up and down the aisle began to talk to his colleagues about the case. Why would some one want to hurt a priest, a man of the cloth, it was beyond all reason but how many criminals have reason he thought.

“Sergeant, can you let me know when we can start cleaning up this good unfortunate mess, as I have mass to prepare for and I don’t want the parishioners to be seeing all this”

“Well I’m sorry father…” Patrick raised his eyebrows.

“Father Stephen”

“Well I’m sorry Father Stephen, but there will be no mass here tonight, forensics need to give this whole place a good going over before you can resume your normal duties. I’m sorry but that’s just the way it is.” As father Stephen turned and began to walk away Patrick called to him. “Father” father Stephen spun around. “Where exactly where you when the shot was fired?”

“I was walking out of the vestry there on the left, I heard a loud cracking sound the last thing I thought it was, was a shot!”

“So you were in direct line with the door and you didn’t even see the back of the person?”

“No sergeant I would have said” Father Stephen began walking away just as the forensic team arrived at the door.

Back at the house, the family began to tuck into a ready prepared buffet of smoke salmon, sandwiches and nibbles and the conversation was naturally about the days events. Large glasses of brandy had been poured and offered around for shock, which most people had taken the host up on. Mary opened the front door. “Come in father, you must be in shock, let me pour you a drink”

“No thank you Mary I’ve come to see my brother, is he here?” Father Stephen began looking around the already crowded room.

“Shaun, Shaun your brother, oh sorry, father Stephen is here to see you.” Mary began walking towards the kitchen where the brandy was kept; she knew Shaun would be there.

“Stephen come in, have a drink.” Shaun was well on his way by now.

“Shaun, will you listen, Father benedict’s died about half an hour ago.” Shaun’s face lost all colour and his mouth fell wide open. “I just thought you should know, the police are now looking for a murderer. Can you break the news to the rest of the family as I have to make arrangements.”

A hush fell over the gathering as Stephen cleared his throat.

“I’m devastated to have to tell you, that father Benedict is now with God” he gestured to the ceiling “If you can remember anything about the shooting then you can contact the police directly” His eyes fell on mark and Matthew, the twin alter boys
“Anonymously, if you wish”

Stephen coughed as though he might add something, before stepping down. Mary rushed over. With rosary beads clutched in her hand, she began to comfort Stephen. Shaun stood in the corner; his eyes were narrowing before he turned away.

As the whisky flowed, no one noticed the day slip into night, or the twins slip out the back door.

“Stephen knows something” Mark smoothed a hand over his spiked brown hair. “He knows something did you see the way he looked at us?”

Matthew shrugged “you mean he suspects. We’re always being suspected, innocent or not. You should know that by now.” He stopped pulling the wooden chest and stood up straight. “This is an effort,” He grunted.

The tree’s rustled overhead and an owl hooted. Mark jumped. Matthew laughed insanely over the wind.

“You’re such a wimp!” he cackled, “Honestly, I try and sort out your mess and all you can do is panic and worry. That’s how you get caught.”

He bent back down to the chest. It was solid cherry wood, polished to a dull sheen. The carving of the moon and scythe on the lid had dust settled into the grooves. The twins fell silent. For now, all that could be heard was the gentle sliding of the wood across the leaves.

By the time everyone had left, Shaun was dangerously drunk. Mary was beginning to annoy him, clutching her rosary, repeating again and again like she had most of the afternoon, “holy mother of god, who would do such a thing.” A big man, he was suprisely light on his feet and in seconds crossed the kitchen, almost lifting her from the ground as his hand gripped her neck. “You know full well who would do such a thing you stupid whore, what I want to know is who you’ve told.” His red face was close to hers, flecks of spittle spraying onto her frightened face. She looked away and he knew, “You’ve told Stephen haven’t you? We agreed, no one must know, not ever, not even Joseph.” Mary sank into a chair, white faced now it was in confession Shaun, I couldn’t keep that secrete. Stephens your brother as well as a priest, he would never repeat it”

“He might repeat it to another priest though, you didn’t think of that did you? I ne3ed to speak to Joseph please god there is time to stop this before it gets worse.”

Thankful for the tablets that had finally soothed daisy into a dreamless sleep, Joseph finally leaned back, his fingers drumming a rhythm on the arm of the scuffed old chair, a habit of his when he was deep in thought. Like many Irish men, he was spare fleshed and dark eyed, the miss-shaped nose and scars testimony to the harsh background of his youth. Where he came from a man had to be able to fight and Joseph had been more able than most. He rose quickly through the ranks and the cash he’d saved in the old wooden box had been the start of what was now an empire.

He thought back over the day, trying to remember the face he’d seen in the crowd outside the church as he’d helped daisy from the car. Looking back at the crowd the man had vanished, leaving just a sense of foreboding. Jo couldn’t place it and it was niggling him. His wealth hadn’t been built easily and enemies had been made but he couldn’t think of any reason why a priest would have been shot. He couldn’t

understand an attempt on his own life, but not the priest's. The only option left was one that made him cold with anger. Someone was working outside the firm and that made them all venerable.

One by one he brought each child into his mind. All of their lives fighting and squabbling. He'd mostly left Daisy to deal with the children and she'd ruled them with a rod of iron, instilling her strong catholic ideals into unwilling minds. If she'd known half the things they'd got up to that he'd sorted out there'd have been a murder long before this. If she had known half the things he'd done to get them where they were now, she'd not have slept so easy over the years. He smiled to himself, still fit and strong for his age, the one saving grace he and his offspring had was that they were loyal to each other until now. He knew Shaun would phone and he sat patiently in his chair.

Evening had settled round Joseph before the phone rang. His steady gaze gave no hint of his feelings as he listened to what Shaun was saying; only a close observer would have noticed the muscles across his belly tense, his knuckles grow white as he gripped the receiver.

"The police haven't got a clue." Shaun's voice was soft and steady.

"And what about your brother?" Joseph asked quietly. "He must know what's been going on"

"I don't think so, but even if he does he wouldn't denounce the family."

"Not even to god?"

"God won't tell." Shaun said with conviction.

Joseph put down the phone and sipped his whisky.

Next morning it was the appearance of Detective sergeant Candy at the door that stirred the family into action.

"Could we have a few words?" he asked Joseph, who nodded and showed him and his accompanying PC into the sitting room.

"I do hope your wife's feeling better" Candy said taking a seat.

"Yes thank you, but she's taken it very badly, the good father was almost part of the family."

"Of course, I understand" The two policemen took coffees that appeared seemingly uncalled for, the normal hospitality of the house.

"I have to admit Joseph, at this stage we have no leads at all; no one seems to have seen more than a silhouette leaving the church after the shooting. To get to the bottom of this I need a motive-just who would want to see father Benedict dead?"

Joseph sipped his coffee thoughtfully.

“To be honest my friend, I can’t believe there was a soul, certainly not in this community. Father was a real saint and loved by everyone.”

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to talk to all your staff and family and many of the parishioners before we get an answer to what’s behind all this. I hope you and your good lady will bear with us and we will try our best not to be intrusive, but who knows that skeletons will be dug up, this sort of case could take some time.”

“Whatever is necessary Patrick,” Joseph said as he put his empty cup and saucer on the tray and collected the others.

“You have a job to do, and the sooner it’s over, the sooner we can all get on with our lives again. You’d better set up office in the library and Ryan here will make sure you have everything you need.”

Ryan had appeared in answer to a servant pull by the fireplace; the second son of Bernard, the butler and Kate the housekeeper, who had been with the parkers for over forty years. He was now in his early twenties and chauffeured as well as being under butler to his father. There was not much that went on that was missed by his eagle eye.

They followed the man into the library and settled themselves in for the long list of interviews they needed to do. Ryan emerged ten minutes later on his way to collect members of staff on the list. As he passed the open door to the sitting room Joseph called him.

“You’ll keep me informed of their progress?” Ryan nodded and showed him the list in his hand. Joseph gestured him on towards the kitchen and made his way upstairs to see how Daisy was.

Not finding her in the bedroom he tried the bathroom and finally resorted to calling her name, alerting the household as it became clear she has disappeared.

The sound of the phone penetrated the general hubbub, heralding a sudden hush throughout the house. Joseph picked up the nearest phone on the nearby landing. It was father Stephens voice, quiet but urgent.

“I think you had better get over here tight away.”

The urgency in Father Stephen’s voice had convinced Joseph of the need to get over to the church quickly. It also took his mind off Daisy and her disappearing act. Still, she’d done it before in the past and she usually turned up.

Not knowing what to expect, he decided that he’d drive himself. As much as he trusted Ryan, there was no need to let him know everything. Besides he thought, the way things were going, who could be trusted anyway?

When he got to the vicarage he found Father Stephen in a state of deep shock.

‘It’s Mark,’ the priest had stuttered, ‘your grandson, one of the twins. I found him hanging from a tree at the back of the garden, you know, where the path leads to the church. He’s dead Joseph. There’s nothing we can do. He’s cold and stiff so he must have done it some time ago. I thought at first it was a return to the old days, you know an assassination, but he clearly intended to take his own life. Here’s the letter he left’

Joseph looked at the body hanging there and then at the letter. A surge of sadness ran through his veins. In the conflict, there had been few that had seen more death than he had but when it was one of your own it hurt, however immune you thought you were.

‘Who have you told father,’ asked Joseph.

‘Nobody’ said the Priest. ‘In view of recent events I thought I’d better speak to you first.’

‘You did well,’ said Joseph. ‘Do me one more favour. Give me a couple of hours then phone the police.’

Outside the churchyard, Joseph sat in his car. Despite his granite emotions, a tear began to roll down his cheek. The twins had been sixteen last month. Nobody should die at that age he thought. As he sat in the car composing himself, he thought about his conversation with the priest. What was the word Stephen had used? Ah yes, it was assassination. Now, recalling the face that he’d seen in the crowd yesterday, he realised who it was. It was Largo, a hired assassin that they’d used in the past when a professional killer was needed. It must have been twenty years since they’d last used him.

He phoned home to check on Daisy. She was O.K.

Joseph started the car. It was time, he thought, that he and Shaun had a little chat.

Despite what he had drunk the night before, Shaun had woken early. The argument with Mary had confirmed what he had already known. She had told everything to Stephen. Religion, he thought to himself, was a treacherous thing. Still, he was on top of the situation. Patrick Candy was a useless policeman and had been known to turn a blind eye to things in the past. But it was unlikely that he’d turn a blind eye to the events of the last few weeks.

Shaun had been deeply committed to the liberation movement. Under Joseph, in the disguise of raising funds for the movement, the Parker dynasty had been involved with arms dealing, drugs, armed robbery, protection and anything else that could be described as general gangsterism. It had been a good life. The movement had prospered and so had the Parkers. But the ceasefire had put paid to all that. Joseph Parker, in the pursuit of respectability had put some of his money into building and construction and a freight business. Slowly, through his many contacts, these businesses flourished.

For Shaun, the ceasefire was like losing a life. He carried on working for Joseph, but respectability and operating within the law lacked any attraction for him. There was no excitement. There were no rich rewards.

The answer for Shaun was to start up his own 'sidelines' as he called them. The hot thing to get into was prostitution and pornography. This had been relatively easy to do. Ironically, it was facilitated with the aid of the Parker Freight Company. Lorries coming back from Eastern Europe would very often have an extra consignment in the form of Eastern European girls lured to the Emerald Isle by the promise of a better life. Little did they suspect it was working in a massage parlour. Likewise, pornographic videos and DVD's from Scandinavia and elsewhere were imported in the same way.

Within several years, Shaun had a string of massage parlours around the county. He treated the girls well and many stayed with him after they had paid off their loan for the travel costs. Mary eventually found out about the business and turned a blind eye. The money was phenomenal and it maintained a lifestyle to which they had become accustomed. She had even suspected that Shaun was 'test driving' the goods but she had no real proof.

The turning point and the key to the current situation had been Father Benedict. It was well known in the parish that Father B had an eye for a pretty girl and rumours about him abounded. It was no real surprise therefore, when Shaun was told that Father B was visiting one of Shaun's parlours some thirty miles away, in disguise. He even had a favourite girl called Nadia. At first, Shaun had been worried, but father B's visits remained unknown to his congregation and probably to the Catholic Church as well.

Closer to Shaun more trouble had erupted. On their sixteenth birthday, the twins, urged on by some of their older friends and inspired by Dutch courage, visited the same massage parlour as frequented by Father B. Initially Mark had been reluctant to go. Not to go would have made him an even bigger coward in the eyes of his brother Matthew, the dominant one. Fortunately for Mark, his girl was kind and treated him like an adult and with respect.. Her name was Nadia and for the first time in his life he was in love.

A few days later, Shaun got to hear of the twin's activities and decided to say nothing. After all, boys will boys and it was a great relief to know that they were normal, particularly Mark. Three days later, Nadia was found dead in her room. Her last client had been Father B.

When Shaun had heard about the incident, his first instinct was to involve the police, but there was too much at stake. No one knew that the girl was in the country; she was unregistered. Therefore it was easy to maintain secrecy and dispose of the body.

It had not been so easy to maintain secrecy however. Shaun had collected the body from the parlour unseen and transported it in a wooden chest in his car. It was when he had been putting the chest in the garage that Mary had caught him. That night he'd told Mary everything. At first she couldn't believe it, but, with what there was to lose, agreed to keep quiet about it. Despite his faults, deep down inside her, she thought she still loved Shaun.

It was on the night of Father Benedict's death that the facts were inadvertently broadcast to others. During the argument between Shaun and Mary, Mark had heard what was said about Nadia. He was devastated.

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Joseph drove quickly to his daughter's house, relieved that Daisy was fine. He went up the drive to the house and parked at the imposing front door. Entering, Joseph called out for Shaun and walked through to the study where Shaun was.

'The police have no idea about the shooting of Father B,' said Shaun smirking.

Joseph, taking in a deep breath replied, 'Shaun, forget about Father B. It's Mark I've come to see you about, he's dead. He hung himself a while ago. He left a note explaining why he did it and also giving details about your other activities. Is it true?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Shaun, 'call it branching out if you like. It gave me the excitement I needed.' Then, with the realisation that Mark was dead Shaun's face whitened and he sat down and began to weep.

'We haven't got time for that,' shouted Joseph. 'I've only managed to stall the police for a couple of hours. Your brother is taking care of that. Is there anything you need to sort out before they get here?'

'There's nothing left to sort out,' said Mary. 'I have taken care of everything except a couple of things.' Neither of them had heard or seen her enter the room. In her hand was a .44 Magnum. 'Sit down dad and for once in your life listen.'

Joseph sat down in an armchair, mystified as to what was going on. 'Mary, you're my daughter, what's happening here.'

Mary began to laugh. 'You've both been blind,' she said. 'Both of you have betrayed the family. It was me that had Father B killed for betraying the church and his priestly vows in Shaun's den of filth. You, my husband, betrayed me with the tarts that you employed, and you dad, betrayed my mother. You couldn't even be bothered to turn up for your own wedding fifty years ago. And, if you Shaun hadn't been tempted by greed maybe my son Mark would still be alive.'

'We can sort all this out,' said Shaun pleadingly. Mary slowly raised the gun and fired. 'Farewell Shaun, there are no whores in heaven. I hope you manage.' Turning to Joseph, she again raised the gun and fired. 'Farewell dad, I love you but the world will be a better place without you.'

Mary put the gun down on the desk and telephoned the police. Slowly she walked through to the hall and sat on the bottom step of the stairs. Religion solved everything she thought and smiled to herself.