

## THE END OF THE LINE

The spot welder jumps from its countersunk mark.

‘Damn!’

I’m so wound up. It’s almost impossible to concentrate. I haven’t worked with George all that often, but even he seems to sense that I’m on edge.

‘Are you okay?’

I glance at my clenched features in the door panel, and force a smile.

‘Yea, fine. Just slipped out. Hasn’t scratched it.’

The older man smiles in return and resumes the conversation where he’d left off.

‘So, remind me, Sean, when did you come over?’

Here we go again. The same questions every time. Like an interrogation. As if my Irishness is the only thing about me worth pursuing. And sadly, perhaps it is.

This would be the last interrogation, though; the last workmate. And the last lovingly crafted sports car to leave the plant. I set down the heavy welder and wipe my hands on my grubby blue overalls.

If only I *could* I forget when I’d left, and why? But there’s no hope of that.

‘Fifteen years ago. Right after Clonnamoor.’

Would George remember? Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn’t.

‘Ooh. Nasty business. Were you involved?’

It’s a straightforward question, so why should I hesitate? But it’s an interesting word: involved. I run the three fingers of my right hand down the scar on my cheek. The little tic pulses in the corner of my mouth.

‘Involved? Shit, no. But it seemed like a good time to get out.’

I feel my cheeks flush and pray George won’t pursue the subject. Too late for me, though. My mind’s already trudging the well-worn path of painful memory.

By nine o’clock, the mist had been lifting, but there’d still been a frosty chill in the air. The street had been almost empty. I knew because I’d walked the length of it. Twice. Up one side and down the other. Searching for the perfect spot. And I hadn’t been the only one.

I often wondered whether the others felt the same sense of responsibility. The same guilt. It didn’t really matter. But I did wonder.

‘So, what will you do now?’

What? I fight my way back to the present. It’s a struggle, but one I’m used to. I spend a lot of time in the past. Going over and over one brief period in the past, to be precise. And I never tire of it. It’s important, more important than anything since. Up until today, that is.

I look across the bonnet. What *am* I going to do?

‘Oh, I don’t know. Maybe go back to Ireland.’

‘You’re lucky then,’ George says, his leathery face crumpling in sadness. ‘I’ve got nothing. Worked here for 40 years. Never known anything else.’

It’s a shock to see such a seemingly hard-bitten character close to tears, his 60-a-day voice cracking with emotion.

I look on in sympathy. Most of the others are the same. They’d come into the plant straight from school, and although, over the years, they may have worked on different models, or in different offices and workshops, they’d walked in through the same gates to the same buildings every day of their working lives. And now, because the new owner and his banking friends had screwed them over, they were being binned, surplus to requirements.

It was enough to make you want to take them out and shoo...

No. Much as I might wish it, it was never going to happen. None of the guys I'd worked with over the years were capable of such dramatic gestures. Losing your job just wasn't enough.

I stroke the scar and feel myself drifting again.

After two hours, the chill had seeped into my very bones, and the mist had turned into a persistent November drizzle. I turned my collar against the damp and stamped my feet, trying to beat some warmth into them. I was still waiting for the troops. When they turned up, I could clear off. Until then, I was stuck.

Were they late? Or had it gone off early? Hardly seemed to matter. But they said it had been early. Either way, it was hard to believe things would have turned out very different. It was just that the presence of troops would have given it, what was the word, legitimacy – in the eyes of some anyway.

A flash of light. A sound beyond mere noise. An impact and a sensation of flying. Waking in a foetal heap, heart thumping, mouth dry. Deaf. Not blind, but afraid to open my eyes. I knew what had happened, and didn't want to look. But I also knew I must. Panic bubbling, I forced my eyelids apart.

The images are as vivid now as they were on that day, 15 years ago. I shut them out, but not before an involuntary shudder and grimace betray my distress.

Thankfully, George is bent over, lost in some new task. No robots here, but craftsmen, proud of their product.

I duck and sit back against the unsprayed bodywork, breathing deeply and washing my face in my hands. For once, there are no cars following this one down the line, forcing the pace. We've been told to take our time.

The wall of the house did most damage. Just blew out over the street. Among its shattered sandstone blocks, lay severed limbs and, even more shocking, fragments of bloodied meat and offal.

I didn't even notice the loss of my little finger. It must have been taken by a piece of shrapnel. Another had ripped a gash in my cheek. Only later did I register my own blood dripping into the larger puddles on the pavement. There was no pain. No physical pain anyway. Just a screaming, mind-numbing, horror.

You see, Patrick had been standing in the shelter of the house. We'd just exchanged a surreptitious wave. Now, my younger brother must be part of that jumble of flesh and bricks, his blood joining the dark rivulets running down the road towards the Cenotaph?

And there, among the debris, where the orderly groups had been standing, waiting for the pastor to begin his Armistice Day address, figures lay on the ground. Some clutched wounds, their mouths moving, expressing fear, anguish and pain, like hammy actors in a silent movie. Others had been still. Perfectly still.

Patrick wasn't in either category. How could he have been? If the house had gone...

'Have you got family there then?'

Fighting to conceal my emotions, I pull myself into the kneeling position and look across the bonnet. George has recovered his composure and is waiting patiently for an answer.

I picture my parents. My survival hadn't been enough. They'd been unable to cope with the loss of their youngest son. Just faded away. Both dead within two years, their bodies shrivelled, faces ashen with grief.

It had been another nail in the coffin of my self-esteem, another item on the long list of reasons for survivor guilt. Family?

'No. Not any more.'

Not even Deirdra. She'd lasted a few years, but got out when drink and depression left me unable to function beyond work and sleep. Couldn't blame her. But I still struggle with the lack of access to Patricia, the granddaughter my parents didn't live to see.

And it all went back to that day.

'So, you'd be making a fresh start, Sean?'

I look at the man, uncomprehending.

'If you went back to Ireland. It'd be a fresh start.'

'Yes. I suppose it would, George.'

I can't really go back. The last time had been for the trial. After that, if not before, I'd become a marked man. And while there was only a slim chance of bumping into an old face over here, over there, it'd be a racing certainty, and that would be that. After today, of course, I won't be safe anywhere. Not that that bothers me.

Ironic that I lost everything with the murder of my younger brother, while the murderer was saved by his.

On my first sweep of the street, I'd seen someone leaving the house. There'd been something about him at the time. If only I'd pulled him over. If only I'd...

They'd found him fairly quickly, but he'd denied being there. With all the other witnesses dead, and no forensics, my evidence had been all there was.

The case for the defence had rested on an alibi provided by the man's younger brother, an up-and-coming businessman with connections. It had been a bare-faced lie.

The words of the judge are seared into my memory.

'Although I sympathise with your grief, I cannot discount the possibility that your testimony is skewed by the loss of your brother. Any verdict based on such a possibility, no matter how remote, would be unsound.'

Not even the fact that Patrick and I were policemen had swayed him. I'd failed everyone a second time.

And then, ten years later, bold as brass, the businessman walked into the factory. He didn't recognise me, such had been the effect of my slide into drink and despair. But I recognised him, grown fat and conceited with success.

It unhinged me. But it also gave me a reason to live. I stopped drinking and started planning.

'Are you going to the ceremony?' George asks.

'Don't know yet. What about you?'

'I wasn't going to, not with him there. But, like I say, it's been forty years of my life. I hate him, but I love these cars.'

He looks along the bonnet, stroking his arm over the metalwork, caressing it.

'Don't think I could bear to miss the last one rolling off and onto the test track, even if it is being driven by that smug bastard and his brother.'

News of the older brother's attendance was like manna from Heaven. I'd known he was alive, and I'd spent years trying to find him. But they were just too good at protecting their own. Whenever I thought I might be close, the lead would dry up. I'd all but thrown in the towel. But, when the younger brother bought the factory, I sensed I was in with a chance - if I was patient. And I've been very patient.

'Perhaps you're right,' I say. 'Perhaps I should go. I'll see how I feel later.'

I look down the factory floor. Without the usual stream of cars, you could see all the way along the line to the paint shop. The painters and finishers are standing in a group, looking towards us.

I prick my conscience one last time, challenging it to make a convincing case for the factory owner. Surely, he couldn't be held responsible for the actions of his older brother. And wasn't his loyalty an admirable quality?

But, now it comes down to it, none of the pleas for clemency dent my resolve. The younger man is as odious now as he had been then. He deserves the same fate as his older

brother, the man I know to be the bomber. Retribution for the loss of everyone's jobs is an added bonus.

I kneel down and reach into an overall pocket, checking that the wires still run from the mobile to the clump of grey, putty-like, material. Content, I slide them into the tubular sill beneath the passenger door. Although I've rehearsed the move countless times, it's still a relief when they slip in easily, but snugly. I seal the gap.

Wiping my hands on my overalls with an air of finality, I stand up and exchange a smile with George. After wallowing briefly in the glow of a job well done, we wave at the painters and finishers, who make a show of putting down their mugs and re-fitting their masks and gloves.

I press the button to set the track rumbling for the final time. The car glides away.

George sighs heavily. 'Well, that's that then, the end of the line.'

I pat the mobile.

Not quite, George. Not quite.