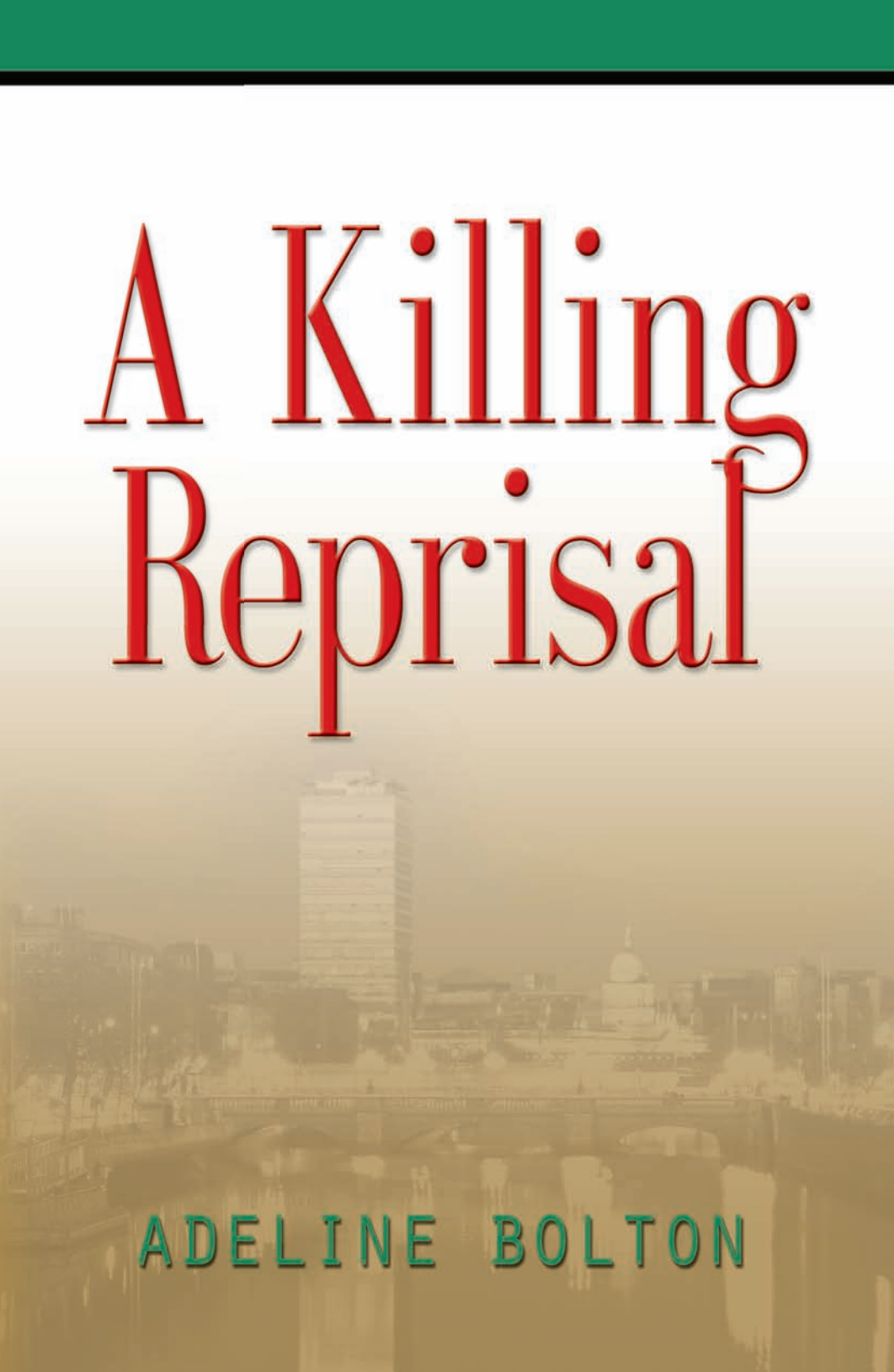


Lindsay O'Loughlin's mourning period ends abruptly when a killer starts to stalk her sister's husband. While investigating, she discovers a connection between the stalker and Conor. He was involved in a fracas on O'Connell Bridge, Dublin, nearly eighteen years earlier, when a youth was kicked to death. The stalker is looking for retribution for Neil's death. She experiences threats, attempted kidnapping and near-death as she tries to find the stalker before he kills again.

A Killing Reprisal

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A Killing Reprisal

ADELINE BOLTON

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ONE

Lindsay pulled into the lay-by and flicked her mobile open. ‘It’s me again. What’s wrong? I’m on my way down. See you.’

She eased the Hyundai back into the stream of traffic heading south. Her Dad thought she was overreacting; let’s hope Tracy doesn’t think so, too. In a way, driving to Cork was a little... daunting.

Breaking out of her comfort zone hadn’t been easy. She had to force herself to get behind the wheel for the long drive when she couldn’t get hold of her sister.

Her Dad had insisted she take his car, said her old Toyota wouldn’t last the trip. It needed replacing. It wasn’t the only thing that needed replacing, she reflected. Clothes were something else she hadn’t bothered with since Jon died. She only realised how shabby her clothes had become when she started to pack an overnight bag.

Why had Tracy opted for their holiday cottage when they could have gone to her in-law’s villa in the south of France? The summer was a complete washout. August was a little warmer and drier, but only just.

Dad’s instructions to Clonakilty were excellent, but Bay View Cottage was trickier to locate. After three stops for directions, she finally rounded a sharp bend to find it nestling in the cliff face.

Lindsay stopped behind Conor’s BMW. It was quiet. Where were the children? Were they on the beach? She looked down at the empty cove. The sandy beach below was still damp-looking from yesterday’s rain.

The hall door was locked. The back door opened when she pressed down on the handle. The kitchen was empty.

‘Tracy. Tracy!’

They couldn't have gone far without the BMW. Unless they had taken off for the continent after all? But why didn't Tracy answer her mobile and why was the back door unlocked.

One of the two doors off the kitchen led to a large sitting room with white walls, turquoise and brown couches, and matching easy chairs. It was empty. Nor was there any sign of life in the hall, which also had the same white walls and parquet flooring as the sitting room.

The silence was unnerving.

'Tracy! Tracy!'

The first door was obviously the children's bedroom with its pinks and blues. It was also deserted. She ran down the hall. The second bedroom looked untenanted.

The silence was eerie as she took the stairs two at a time, pushed the door of the master bedroom open.

'Tracy!' Her sister was huddled against the pillows on the unmade king size bed in crumpled jeans and top. Her navy blue eyes red rimmed and her blonde hair dull and lifeless.

'My God, you look awful.' She threw her arms around her and hugged her close. 'What's wrong?'

'Lindsay! Oh, Lindsay.'

'What on earth's happened?'

'Something so terrible...'

'Jack! Gillian! Oh God, where are they?'

A deep sigh racked her body. 'They're with the babysitter.'

'The babysitter?'

'I was looking for Conor.'

'Where's Conor?'

'I don't know,' cried Tracy. 'I don't know.'

'You poor thing. When did he leave?'

'Sunday... at five.'

That *was* precise. 'Why didn't you ring me? I'd have come down immediately. So would Dad.'

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Tracy started to hiccup, a sure sign she had been on a mega crying spree. ‘And tell you what? That my husband left me? But I don’t know that he did. I mean, he did leave but not the way you think.’ She rubbed her forehead distractedly. ‘Or maybe he did.’

‘I’m so sorry, Tracy. Does he want a divorce?’

‘What are you talking about? Don’t you bloody understand anything, Conor’s disappeared.’

‘He’s disappeared? You’re not making any sense.’

‘He went to buy ice cream.’

‘Ice cream?’

Oh God, this was getting worse by the second.

Tracy knuckled her eyes dry.

‘We ran out of ice cream on Sunday. Conor walked to the village to get some at around five. He never came back. I’ll bloody kill him... when he does.’

‘Never came back?’ repeated Lindsay. ‘He must have had an accident. He’s in hospital somewhere. Did you report it?’

A happily married man doesn’t just disappear. They *were* happily married, weren’t they?

‘Will you shut up and listen, you stupid idiot.’ Realising she had gone too far, Tracy took a deep breath before continuing, ‘I went to the garda station. They asked the usual bullshit-questions instead of going out to look for Conor. Had we marital problems; money problems; was the business in trouble? I told them it had nothing to do with anything like that. I begged them to search for Conor. Told them he must have had an accident. But all they said was he’ll turn up.’

‘And?’

‘They sent out Conor’s description locally. But so far... I’m going back to the station this afternoon. They said yesterday they’d check the CCTV footage in the supermarket today... if he’s still missing.’

Thinking aloud, Lindsay said, ‘So, they’ve sent out his details. Did they ask you what he was wearing? What money and credit cards he had on him when he disappeared.’

‘Yes. Yes.’ Tracy scrambled off the bed, hiccupping, and went into the on-suite bathroom. She sluiced her face with cold water and returned to the bedroom. While drying it, she mumbled through the white, fluffy towel, ‘They’ve also checked the hospitals.’

‘Could he have gone for a swim? Got cramp... got into difficulties?’

‘You’re not listening, Lindsay,’ she shouted before flinging the towel on the floor. ‘I told you, he went to the village for *ice cream*.’ She was touchy, snappy even. ‘If he’d gone swimming, I would have said so.’

But if he had taken an impulsive swim and got into difficulties, Tracy might have a long wait for Conor’s... body to wash up on the shore. His body! What was she thinking? It wouldn’t come to that.

‘Could he have committed...’ Lindsay couldn’t finish the sentence but Tracy guessed what she had been going to say

‘No, he couldn’t,’ she snapped. Grabbing a bundle of tissues from the box on the bedside table, she blew her nose. ‘I know he was worried about something, but take his own life? No. Conor’s too positive; hasn’t a negative bone in his body. Do you think he’d leave me and the children stranded in this bloody out-of-the-way place if he could help it? I don’t think so.’

Lindsay hesitated before asking, ‘But what if he wanted out of your marriage. What if he wasn’t happy?’

‘Happy?’ Tracy’s temper flared again. ‘I’ll bloody happy him if that’s the case.’ Her spurt of anger evaporated almost immediately. She said more calmly, ‘Conor *was* happy, I’m sure of it. But if he wanted out – if that’s what this is all about -

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the bastard could have waited until we were in Dublin. Not left us in an isolated holiday home. When he does turn up, I'll boot him all the way to Dublin.'

'And I'll help you.' Lindsay grinned for the first time. Anger was good, wasn't it? 'Why don't you have a shower, do your hair? I'll make us a strong cup of tea.'

While Tracy was showering, she went into the kitchen. The colour scheme was clever, she thought. The walls were a pale grey and the floor a dark slate grey. The white units and black granite worktop were also striking. A touch of red on the window wall and blind gave warmth to the room.

She opened the big American-style fridge. The salad looked ghastly, the meat dodgy, but the milk was within its use by date.

Tracy's hair was still wet when she joined her in the kitchen in a fresh pair of blue jeans and matching shirt.

'Here, have some tea, you poor thing.'

They sat on stools at one end of the island.

Lindsay suggested, 'Why don't you close the cottage, head home.'

'No! Not without Conor.'

Her instinct had been right; something was wrong, but it was more serious than anything she had imagined. At worst, she thought Tracy might be sick, or the twins. But a missing husband? If she hadn't followed her intuition and driven down, God knows what would have happened to them.

'Let's ring Dad. He'll help.'

'No, no! Let's wait.' Looking at her sister curiously, she asked. 'Why did you come down? You've refused all our invitations.'

'We were trying to get hold of you on your mobile and the landline. When we couldn't, I thought something was wrong.'

‘Jack was playing with my mobile. Couldn’t remember where he left it. I only found it this morning. I don’t know why the landline isn’t working. I’ll ring Eircom when my mobile is charged.’

‘When did you involve the gardai?’

‘Monday morning.’ Tracy slipped off the stool and started to pace. ‘When Conor didn’t come home Sunday night, I thought he was sulking because I wouldn’t close the cottage and return to Dublin. I wanted to stay on. The weather had improved; the children were enjoying it.’ She sighed. ‘If only I *had* gone back Saturday, none of this would have happened.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. A man doesn’t vanish just because he has a disagreement with his wife.’

‘What else could it be?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m sure Conor didn’t disappear because you wouldn’t return to Dublin. I mean, that’s a ridiculous notion. Was he depressed?’

‘Not depressed... but he did become more security conscious when someone he used to know in the Sandycove Rowing Club was murdered. It was after his funeral Conor suggested holidaying at the villa. But the twins love it here and it’s safe for toddlers.’

‘I often think about Madeleine McCann’s abduction last May. I was terrified that something similar could happen to Jack or Gillian. But for Conor to disappear; that never entered my head.’

‘Clonakilty is close and Mrs Brennan babysits whenever we want to go out in the evening. She’s very experienced; has four grownup children.’

Tracy was trying to justify her decision to stay in Cork, but that was ridiculous. How could she have known her husband would disappear? Lindsay got her feet and replenished their mugs from the teapot.

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She leaned against the black granite worktop, nursing her mug. 'Did you tell the gardai?'

'What?'

'About Conor's friend being murdered.'

'No. I only remembered it myself yesterday. Why? Oh my God! You think Conor's been murdered?'

'Of course I don't.' But if Conor turns up dead, it might be very relevant. She daren't voice that thought. It would upset Tracy more than she was already. 'Was there anything wrong with the business?'

'No. The half yearly figures were up 40% on the same period last year.' She reflected for a moment. 'Things were beginning to slow a little, Conor told me. But he wasn't worried about it. No, it's definitely not the business.'

'Could there have been a problem with the staff or the premises? Something he mightn't want to worry you with?'

'I don't think so. Conor thrived in the business world. Problems were a challenge to him, not a worry.'

'Maybe he was tired. That he needed a break sooner?'

Tracy started to bite her nails. Something she hadn't done since childhood. She looked her sister in the eye before voicing something which was obviously worrying her.

'Could he be cheating on me, Lindsay?'

'You mean another woman? It's possible. Did you suspect an affair before he went missing?'

'No. Never.'

'If he was meeting a woman...' When Tracey's face turned paler, she hurried on, 'And they had an accident...'

Agitated, Tracy shouted, 'I told you, the gardai checked the hospitals.'

'They could have used a different surname.' People are always checking into hotels under names like Smith or Jones when they're having illicit affairs, aren't they?

‘No one with Conor’s description was in an accident! How many times do I have to tell you?’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just exploring possibilities.’

Tracy’s navy blue eyes – so like their mother’s - filled. Sniffing, Tracy shook her head. ‘No. It’s all right. You’re only saying out loud what I was thinking. I’ve been wracking my brains since Sunday, but nothing makes sense.’

‘Are any of his clothes missing?’

‘No, but I’ll check again.’

Upstairs, she opened the wall-to-wall wardrobe. ‘It was one of the first things the gardai asked. But there’s nothing missing, not even his swimming trunks.’ She stared at his side of the wardrobe, clasping and unclasping her forearms, at the neatly arranged designer jackets and trousers, the polo shirts, jeans and swimshorts. His white running shoes, beach shoes and slip-ons were there, the only pair missing were the ones he was wearing on Sunday, his black trainers. ‘We keep clothes here so we don’t have to keep packing, as you know. I only bring the children’s clothes with us. You know how fast they grown out of everything.’ Near breaking point, she cried, ‘I’ve gone through all this with the gardai! I haven’t a clue where Conor is or why he’s disappeared.’

Lindsay put her arms around her and hugged her close. ‘Come on. Let’s go downstairs. I’ll make a fresh pot of tea.’

TWO

Who was the tall brunette? Family or friend?

I picked up the binoculars and looked at the registration. Dublin. What was she doing here? Did Osbourne's wife send for her? But another adult wouldn't deter me. Anyone who gets in the way will get the same treatment.

Where has the bastard skulked off to? Thinks he's got away again. But his wife and kids are still here. He can't stay away forever, has to come back sometime. What if he doesn't come back?

Deal with Frank later. Touching him now would bring the gardai on me. It's common knowledge I assaulted him. Thought he could live in Lisa's house as if nothing had happened. She was proud of that house. Much more glamorous than the Ma's; Lisa never said that, but I thought it on my first visit.

Stop drifting! Stay focused!

The bastard will escape justice if you don't get on with it. Thinks he's outsmarted me. Thought he could bury it forever. Money isn't going to save him this time. The bastard hasn't a clue what's coming at him.

They're on the move. I picked up my backpack, threw the binoculars in and scrambled through the bushes. I got to the Nissan Note and slipped inside, turned the engine on and was reversing out of the drive when the BMW drove past. Are they going to meet Osbourne?

I forced myself to keep a discreet distance behind the BMW, even though my adrenaline was pumping. If she's picking up Osbourne, I'll finish the job on the way back.

I thumped the steering wheel. Watched the two women go into the babysitter's house. They were only picking up the kids.

THREE

The village nestled in a hollow.

‘No wonder you like it here, Tracy, it’s beautiful.’

The hanging baskets tied to the lampposts, with purple, pink and cerise petunias spilling over, gave the street a festive air. Next to the pub with its shiny black façade, a boutique displayed fashionable ladies clothes in the window. On the opposite side there was a supermarket and a café.

Main Street was thronged with tourists. Some stopped and looked at postcards displayed outside the newsagent.

A small ancient church stood on a hillock overlooking the village as if guarding the community

Here she was admiring the scenery when her sister was in bits. The knuckles of Tracy’s hands were white from gripping the steering wheel too tightly. She stopped outside a bungalow, on a half acre of well tended garden, just outside the village. Lavender bushes bordered the path and small shrubs lined the walls. As they walked to the black hall door with its stained glass panels on either side, she noticed the window frames were also black and thought what a good contrast they made to the white-washed walls.

Rachel Brennan was a middle-aged woman with greying brown hair, chubby cheeks and twinkling blue eyes. Lindsay liked her on sight. She could understand Tracy’s complete confidence in her.

‘Come in. Have a cup a tea,’ she said, when Tracy introduced them.

‘No. Thank you, Rachel.’

The back door opened. Jack ran in. Gillian was behind him.

‘Aunty Lins!’

‘Mummy.’

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‘I’ve given them their lunch, Mrs Osbourne.’ Her twinkling blue eyes turned serious. ‘Any news?’ she whispered.

‘No. We’re going to call into the garda station on the way home.’ Tracy swallowed what sounded like a sob. ‘I’m hoping they’ll have some today.’

The twins weren’t identical but looked a lot like Tracy when she was young, except that Gillian had Conor’s brown eyes. Lindsay took hold of a small hand in each of her own.

‘Come on, you two, into the car.’

‘Thank you, Rachel,’ Tracy called over her shoulder as she hurried after them.

‘Let’s stop at the café and have a sandwich. I could do with some food and a strong coffee. So could you.’

‘I couldn’t eat anything, I’d be sick. But I’ll have a coffee.’

Tracy drove to the public car park behind the supermarket. They walked back to the café. It looked a fun place with pink wall and cups and saucers painted in different shades to give the impression the dishes were being thrown in the air.

Lindsay ordered apple juice for Gillian and orange for Jack, a sandwich for herself and two coffee lattes.

‘Here you are,’ the waitress said, as she unloaded her tray. ‘Any news, Mrs Osbourne?’

‘No, afraid not,’ Tracy replied.

Another woman stopped at their table a few minutes later. ‘Have you heard from Mr Osbourne yet?’

‘No, Joan.’

Tracy got to her feet when she moved away. ‘Let’s go before anyone else asks.’

They put the children in their buggy, left the BMW in the public car park, and walked the short distance to the garda station. The local station was a two story cream building with a blue front door and similar coloured window frames.

Before they went in, Lindsay asked, 'Would you like me to talk to the duty sergeant?'

'With your experience you might be a little more successful prising information out of him, than I was.'

The Duty Sergeant was standing behind the counter writing into a large book. He was a middle-aged, balding man, with a fringe of grey hair. His tired looking eyes shifted from Tracy to Lindsay and back to Tracy.

'Has Mr Osbourne turned up?' he asked, kindly.

'No. Not yet.'

'Look, I'm Mrs Osbourne's sister, Lindsay O'Loughlin. Have you any news yet as to my brother-in-law's whereabouts?'

'No, but I'm sure Mr Osbourne will turn up soon,' he said, in a voice which was meant to reassure, but didn't.

'I've suggested to my sister we drive back to Dublin. It's not necessary for us to stay, is it?'

'Take a seat.' He pointed to the row of grey plastic seats opposite. 'I'll check with the investigating member.' He returned a few minutes later. 'That'll be fine, but leave your Dublin address and telephone number. If anything turns up here, we'll notify you.'

While Tracy bent over the buggy to put on Gillian's shoes again, Lindsay leaned over the counter and whispered to the garda, 'Do you think Conor's dead?'

'There's nothing to indicate foul play,' he replied gently. 'He's an adult. Lots of people leave home.'

'Yes, but without saying anything to his wife? Surely that's strange?'

'Not so strange. Lots of spouses do it. Mr Osbourne's only been missing three days. About ninety percent of missing persons turn up within a week. I'm sure Mr Osbourne will turn up soon with a satisfactory explanation.'

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Tracy heard that. ‘You have to search for him! Something’s happened to Conor, I know it.’

‘Mrs Osbourne, we’re doing everything possible at this early stage.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘We checked the supermarket’s CCTV footage this morning. Your husband was in the supermarket. There was a bus into Clonakilty round that time. Someone fitting his description got on it.’ He looked from the children to Tracy. ‘But if Mr Osbourne doesn’t turn up in the next week, we’ll call in the helicopter and the dogs. Have them sweep the area. Don’t worry, I promise you, we’ll do all we can to find him’

‘Why can’t you do that now? Conor’s never done anything like this before.’ Her voice broke. ‘He wouldn’t,’ she insisted.

The twins, as if sensing their mother’s distress, start to cry. The sergeant shifted his feet, picked up the biro and twiddled with it.

‘Why don’t you believe me?’ she cried, her voice rising. ‘He’s had some sort of accident, I’m telling you.’

Jack sobbed, ‘Mummy, I want to pooh.’

Gillian, who always did everything Jack did, stopped whinging long enough to cry, ‘Me too, Mummy,’

He started to wriggle in the buggy. ‘Mummy, it’s coming. Mummy. Mummy.’

Oh God, what a place to pick? ‘Tracy, I’ll take them back to the cafe.’

Lindsay left the station and ran, pushing the buggy in front. When she returned, ice cream having dried up the twins’ tears, her sister was sitting in the BMW outside the garda station. ‘Come on kids, into the car.’ She strapped the twins into their car seats and put the buggy in the boot, then climbed into the passenger seat.

‘Did the sergeant say anything else?’

‘If Conor doesn’t turn up by Sunday, they’ll check if he’s made any withdrawals from an ATM or used his credit cards.’

‘At least we know he *did* go to the supermarket, and was spotted on the Clonakilty bus.’ But where the hell was he now?

‘I don’t want to go back to Dublin. Will you stay? Conor might have had a fall. He might be suffering from amnesia. The sergeant said that was a distinct possibility when I called on Monday. It wasn’t him on the bus, couldn’t have been. No way would he go off like that. And I want to be here when he comes back.’

‘I told the agency I was taking leave but I didn’t put a timeframe on it. I can stay as long as you like. But if we’re staying, we need to buy food.’

They went back to the supermarket and loaded the trolley with groceries. She was tempted to talk to the supermarket manager, to ask him if he could remember any detail, no matter how trivial, about Conor’s visit on Sunday. But one look at Tracy’s ashen face decided her against it. Anyway, the gardai had interviewed him thoroughly, she was sure. They left the supermarket and drove back to Bay View.

Inside the cottage, she suggested, ‘Why don’t you take the twins for a walk while I unpack the groceries.’

Jack implored, ‘Beach, Mummy, beach. Aunty Lins can see me swimming.’

They could both swim a little, she knew. Tracy took them to the swimming pool for the mother and toddler session every week.

‘Beach, Mummy,’ Gillian implored.

In a low voice, Tracy said, ‘It’s the last place I want to go. I thought once we packed the groceries away we might drive around looking for Conor.’

With a frozen pizza in her hand, Lindsay turned to face her sister. ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea. We can’t drive aimlessly

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around with two young children. Anyway, where would we start? Better to stay here and take the twins to the beach.’ She played her trump card. ‘If Conor turns up, he’ll see us there.’ Tracy looked so badly in need of sleep, she suggested, ‘Why don’t you lie down, take a nap? I can take the twins.’

‘I couldn’t sleep. And you’re right. We’ll be in full view.’
‘And stop worrying. Conor’s alive.’

They got tired making sandcastles. Lindsay took them down to the water’s edge. They paddled in the shallows. She showed Jack how to kick his legs while doing the breaststroke. Next, it was Gillian’s turn. She adored splashing, but wasn’t too keen on instruction.

Eventually, she gave up all pretence of learning the breaststroke and pleaded, ‘Sandcastles, Aunty Lins. Want to make sandcastles.’

Taking her small hand, Lindsay walked to the water’s edge. ‘Go to Mummy. Tracy, here’s Gillian. I’m going for a swim.’

She struck out forcefully using the freestyle stroke and didn’t stop until she was a kilometre from shore. Turning on her back, she drifted. The water wasn’t cold, under different circumstances she would have revelled in it. Flipping onto her stomach, she stared at the beautiful coastline. It looked fabulous in the afternoon sunshine.

FOUR

I picked up the binoculars again and watched the women and kids frolicking in the sea and on the beach. Osbourne's wife looked... happier. Had she heard from the bastard? Was he on his way back? She wouldn't be happy for long. As I watched, they reminded me of us when we were young.

*

The Ma never liked cooking dinner on Sundays.

On fine days in the summer, we went to Portmarnock beach and sat in the sand dunes with a windbreaker to protect us from the breeze. On wet summer Sundays and dry winter ones, we'd drive to Howth and have our takeaway in Da's old banger. Afterwards, we walked the pier. It was Lisa's and the Ma's favourite place. They thought Howth was the swankiest place of all, which it was, and still is.

We were poor by today's standards. But even though unemployment was high in the late eighties, Da managed to get me into Denihan's to serve my apprenticeship as an electrician when I completed the Leaving Cert. Denihan was a hard man to work under, but it was a job and I was learning a trade, which Dad said would take me anywhere.

Lisa trained as a hairdresser, something she loved. During secondary school she worked in the Rathmines Salon on Saturdays, learned a lot, but had to start at the bottom when she went into it full-time. She was always dyeing her own hair even before she started to train full-time. You never knew what colour it would be, she changed it so often. She was good, too, if the tips were anything to go by. When she had a good week, she gave the Ma some money to buy something for herself. She was generous to a fault.

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Neil. Neil was going to university. He was a natural-born student, loved studying. Neither parent went beyond the Intermediate Cert. That was why education was so important to the Ma. If she had been born later, she would have sat the Leaving Cert and gone on to university, she was fond of saying. It was why the Ma was so determined Neil would go to university.

Everyone loved Neil; the neighbours; his classmates; his teachers.

*

FIVE

It was on Wednesday July 25 2007, when I returned to Dublin to finish off the last of the Rowers. He wasn't hard to track down. I knew from the old newspapers that Osbourne grew up in the Glasthule area but nobody of that name was listed in the telephone directory when I checked. There were five entries in the residential listings which spelt that surname with a u. One of those entries read Osbourne, C & T, with a Fortfield Terrace address. There was also a G Osbourne listed with an address in Rathfarnham. Was the G for Giles? That was the name of bastard's father. I rang the number to check. He was the right Giles.

Next, I looked in the business section because I knew that the family had their own property company. There was an entry with the name Osbourne under the business listings. It was called Osbourne Property Developers Ltd with an address in Rathfarnham Village. The Companies Registration office in Dublin Castle verified that Giles, Madge and Conor were directors.

I drove to Rathfarnham Village. But with the one way traffic and practically no unobtrusive parking, decided that surveillance of the business premises would be too difficult to do from a car. The building was situated on a curve and commanded views of two roads; if I watched from one side, I might miss him coming and going from the other. The following day I took the bus and walked round the village, passing the premises a few times and observing it from all angles. The ground floor was all glass, inside open plan. There was a reception area near the curved, glass doors and three occupied desks behind reception. Two men were standing chatting on my first reconnaissance, but neither looked like my target.

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Friday July 27, I returned to look around again. During the following week I alternated between watching the business premises and the Fortfield Terrace house. By the following Friday I had a fix on Osbourne; he had dark brown hair receding a little and was about 6 feet tall or maybe slightly less. His wife was a good looking blonde. They had two children, but they weren't my target, I only wanted him. Friday morning August 3, I was once again in Rathfarnham village.

There was only the young receptionist sitting behind the reception desk, the other desks were empty. I went inside and asked to speak to Conor but she told me he was out on business. Could she give him a message? I left a message to say that David Lowry wanted to speak to him and that I would call back. If he knew Lowry was dead, which he must do by now, that should spook the bastard. I called back in the afternoon, but the place had closed early. There was a notice on the door that the company was closed for holidays and wouldn't reopen until August 22. There was an emergency number listed should anyone need to contact the company urgently.

On Sunday morning August 5, I drove the blue Nissan Note rental to Fortfield Terrace and parked some distance from the house. There was a 2007 silver Ford Focus in the drive and a black sapphire BMW 7 Series behind it. When a man started to put suitcases into the BMW it seemed a good idea to get closer. I knew the car was registered to Osbourne. The bastard looked as if he was going on holiday. Was he flying or driving?

It wasn't difficult to follow the BMW discreetly, although at times he put the boot down and then it was harder to keep up without making it obvious I was tailing him. They were heading South, I knew, when the car turned left at the junction of the Belgard and Naas Roads. Four hours and a number of short stops later, the car arrived at its destination, a house

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overlooking Bay View Cove about ten km beyond Clonakilty. It was situated at the end of a cul-de-sac. Fortunately, I'd left a good distance between us. When the BMW swung through the electronic gates, I backed smartly into the drive of another house, turned and parked half a kilometre away and walked back.

Their routine was the same most days. They went to the beach; shopped in the village; went out to dinner two or three nights a week. When they went out, a woman from the village babysat for them. There was no opportunity to complete my... assignment. That is until Sunday August 19.

Osbourne left the house alone and on foot, at five pm. He went into the village supermarket. I planned to make a move when he reached the small inlet, on his return journey. The road curved outwards and blocked the view either side for a few seconds. A few seconds were all I needed.

When he didn't come out of the supermarket in thirty minutes, I went inside. There was no sign of him inside or at the back of the building. I stood in front of the supermarket - frustrated at my own stupidity - when a bus passed by. I had a brief glimpse of a dark, slightly bald head before it gathered speed. Bastard! He'd outwitted me. I ran for the Nissan Note and followed. Where was he going? Why had he taken the bus and not the BMW? Was he on his way back to Dublin? I discounted that; he would have taken his car. And his family were still at Bay View and the business wasn't reopening until Wednesday 22. I caught up with the bus at Clonakilty. When it stopped, a man got off. It wasn't the bloody bastard!

I drove back to Bay View and parked the rental in the drive of a holiday cottage with a 'For Sale' sign planted in the unkempt lawn. Anyone passing would think a buyer was inside. I went the rest of the way on foot. There was nothing else to do

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but wait it out. I stationed myself in the shrubbery near their gate all night, but he didn't return. I was slipping up when I lost him in a small village supermarket!

Over the next few days Osbourne's wife dropped the children off at the babysitter's each morning and drove aimlessly along the coast road. She picked them up again around five in the evening. Why was she driving around on her own? Had they quarrelled? Was the marriage in trouble? Was she looking for Osbourne to make up? That could explain Osbourne taking off like he did, could have been in a temper.

There was no indication they were leaving the beach anytime soon. It was worth the risk. The rear door was unlocked. There were two bunches of keys beside the toaster, one bunch fitted the Cork house. The other had a Bluetooth box and what looked like house keys; the Fortfield Terrace's? I checked out the wardrobes to see if Osbourne's clothes were missing. Everything looked as if he planned to come back. All the suitcases were still there.

Lindsay O'Loughlin's mourning period ends abruptly when a killer starts to stalk her sister's husband. While investigating, she discovers a connection between the stalker and Conor. He was involved in a fracas on O'Connell Bridge, Dublin, nearly eighteen years earlier, when a youth was kicked to death. The stalker is looking for retribution for Neil's death. She experiences threats, attempted kidnapping and near-death as she tries to find the stalker before he kills again.

A Killing Reprisal

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