

# **EXTRAORDINARY TIMES**

By Rosemary Jenkinson

CHAPTER THREE

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It's mid-afternoon – chemo time. He pads into the kitchen and swallows his two pills. 'All right?' Brenda checks, her eyes a familiar fusion of concern and affection.

'All grand.'

'That university fella seemed quite nice.'

'Ach, just another grasper. All he wanted to hear is when there's going to be another war.'

David Donnan seemed to treat him as a commanding officer although he hasn't been one for years. Perhaps he let his mouth run away with itself at points, but it's no big deal since Donnan has guaranteed secrecy.

'I'm going round the Welders for a couple. Won't be back for my tea.'

'Good,' she smiles. 'It'll do you good to be with your pals.'

'Aye, and a thousand quid in my sky-rocket too,' he grins with a cocky click-click of his tongue.

Well, not quite yet, but he's signed Donnan's invoice and the grand will be in his pocket in a few days' time. He'd never have agreed to the interview if it hadn't been for the cash incentive. These days, he has to rake in as much as he can. Not that the oncologist has told him how long he has to live or anything. He might live on for years if the chemo does the trick. Cancer of the liver it is. He might have known he'd damage it, all the grog he's been on in his life.

Oh, he'd still played it foxy enough with that Donnan character. He tried not to give away the names that could make it awkward if news ever leaked of his revelations. He has the real testimony in a box in the roof space, since stories like his can make fifteen to twenty grand in an auction house in Dublin. After he cowps it, the cash will keep

Brenda and his son sweet for a while anyway. And why shouldn't he make money out of the Troubles? Sure look at all those ex-IRA men with their government jobs and their fancy holiday cottages in Donegal. It sends him flipping to think of those bomber boyos making hay all these years. No wonder the youngbloods in the east are wanting to bomb the New Ireland movement. If they play it right, violence could be a passport to power and riches. He never played it right himself, though he did land a cushy community job for years, until the age of fifty-nine when the funding ran out.

'Now, don't spend it all in one session,' Brenda joshes him at the front door and he laughs and waves back at her.

Not a soul apart from Brenda and his son know about the cancer. Most people in this district keep their ear to the ground, but he'll never breathe a word of his illness. He hitches his jeans up as he walks, a new habit he's acquired as he's no arse at all to fill them. He used to take up most of the pavement when he walked but he's a shadow of himself these days. Not that it's all bad. On the positive side, shedding a few kilos means he's dodged the diabetes bullet.

The first hint of spring seems to have arrived with a surge of temperature into the late teens. Children are cycling down steep slopes, enjoying the breeze in their hair, and pigeons swoop down the roads like they're landing on runways. He passes houses where people are sunbathing without lotion on their doorsteps, happy to risk third-degree burns in their brief allotted time to get a tan.

He turns into Dee Street past the roll call of dead volunteers and sees the huge yellow cranes bright as crocuses, as if they've burst out of the land after the long winter. The primula and celandine in the flowerboxes and the dandelions on the kerb are chromatic echoes, like drips of paint blown across the east.

He notices Freddie's mobility scooter sitting outside the Welders as usual and smiles. The joke is that Freddie's scooter is programmed to take him to the pub and nowhere else, just like the horse in *The Quiet Man*.

On he goes into the Welders, marching up to the shiny bar. Two of the boys are there and a Friday feeling is in the air. Boys, he repeats to himself, catching himself on. They're owl hands now like himself; Freddie with his white hair and Rab as bald as a bollard and coggly on his pins. Since when did this turn into an owl fellas' pub? It's like he's hardly noticed the years pass.

But it doesn't take him long to clock a nexus of younger lads sitting in the corner, discussing battle tactics. He can sense it himself, the hands tight on the pints to hide the stress, the low voices. It's been a long time since the pub felt so galvanised.

'Pints all round,' he tells Martha the bartender. 'My shout.'

He's feeling generous and cancer has taught him to splash the cash while he can.

'Ooh, a win on the geegees, is it?' Martha joshes him. 'Or do we have the Lottery to thank?'

'The only horse he bets on is an owl nag at home,' jokes Freddie, then puts a hand up to Martha.

'Sorry 'bout that, love.'

'Sexist cunt,' says Martha, as a matter of form.

'How much did you win, Kyle?' teases Freddie, his top lip permanently protruding in readiness to say the outrageous. 'Fifty millionas?'

'Never you mind.' Kyle laughs it off, but Rab narrows his eyes.

'I got it. That prick with the briefcase at your door today. Who was he?'

'Just a mate.'

'Oh, aye, right, you're friends with briefcase guys, are ya?'

Kyle ignores him and takes a sip of his pint. He might have known someone would spot Donnan. These days, with Irish unity in the offing, the old paranoia is rearing its head and there are touts and scouts on every corner. He's even heard rumours of British agents infiltrating the area. There's a lot of anger around because of the poll, and anger makes people dangerous.

His upper lip skims the frothy top he's been dreaming about all week. Jeez though, but that pint tastes rancid. He's just about to tell Martha the Guinness is off when he realises it must be the chemo to blame for the boiled-broccoli taste on his palate. Fuck. He can't even stomach a nice steak these days; everything he eats has to be bland like egg and chips. He takes another gulp wishing he could pinch his nostrils together to get it down him.

'Can I get a wee shot of Drambuie there?' he asks Martha.

'Here, it'll be a bottle of champers next!' she shouts out for the banter, knowing Kyle rarely deviates from his usual Guinness.

'Sure, give us a mill for my charity,' says Freddie. 'The Red Hand Retirees, a worthy cause all right.'

'I'll give to AA instead for a rehab suite in your name, will that do you?'

Ah, it's great, the back and forth of the banter, the back and forth of the pint glasses – he hasn't been out much since his diagnosis.

'Cheers, Kyle!'

Mackers' lantern-jawed nephew, Flint, raises his glass to him.

He submarines the shot glass into his Guinness. It's been years since he's done this. He starts tossing back the dark stuff, then when the pint starts to tilt, the shot glass slides down, clattering against his teeth. He hopes he hasn't cracked his crown at the front as he drains the syrupy sweetness, the tangy gooey mapleness of the Drambuie.

Necking the nectar takes the terrible taste away.

His legs feel a bit weak, so he sits down on a barstool. He's always prided himself on standing at the bar, being rock solid, but, hey, needs must when the devil drives. He wonders though if his infirmities are real or psychological. He mustn't believe he's weaker than he is.

'Same again,' he says to Martha who is rubbing away at the brass pumps with a beer towel. She's like a sergeant major. The bar is always spotless when she's on and there's never a lick of bother among the punters.

He cops a wee sneaky behind him. That table is growing. The same team he saw gathering two weeks ago – a handy looking lot. He knows Flint, of course, and one of the other lads, Carlton, who is Eddie's son – the new gen is gearing up for war. A yearning comes over him to be in the know, and yet he's glad he doesn't have to look behind him in the street every day or wash his hands in bleach. He's also relieved his own son Glenn has nothing to do with this crowd, though the crew he's in with are hardly respectable. He recently fell out with Glenn for being on the scrounge over yet another drugs bill.

The last time Kyle was here, he overheard whispers about bombs and he tries to tune in again. He picks up the word Taoiseach, but can't tell if they're talking about the Taoiseach's address up on the wall today or anything more sinister. Taoiseach is the Irish word for chieftain, he remembers. And the Taoiseach has certainly banged on the tribal drums, stirring up nationalist desire for a New Ireland, showing scant regard for loyalists.

He turns back to the bar in case the group spot him earwigging. But it's much harder to hear when you're facing away. He catches the odd stray word like Arcade, confirming what he already knows.

This time the shot glass slides, he sticks his tongue against his teeth as a buffer, aye, he won't get caught like that again. He drinks down the dram of Drambuie, nothing sweeter, straight from the bees who suck on the bell heather.

‘That windfall you got,’ Rab says to him, a sleekit look on his face. ‘Did you give any info about us?’

‘Course I didn’t. Whatever you say, say nothing,’ Kyle says, tapping the side of his nose, but can’t resist adding, ‘No, I’m cleverer than that. I’ve perfected the art of saying lots without saying anything.’

As soon as the words come out of his mouth he regrets them. He must be full as forty cats. He shouldn’t be talking in riddles. He has no weight on him to tolerate the drink any more; it’s as though the optics have been mainlined into his veins and all his blood has been replaced with air. His brain lobes are fuzzy round the edges. Since when was he the type to slabber in public? To brag about his own craftiness?

A slap comes on his back and the shot glass whacks back down into the pint glass. Stupid fucking bastard near smashed his teeth against the rim. He looks up and it’s Mackers, his old comrade.

‘Mackers the Man!’ he greets him, holding out his hand.

Mackers looks at it contemptuously. ‘I just heard that a snooper was round your house this afternoon and now you’re playing the big shot, buying the bar out like you’re some sort of celebrity.’

‘Just buying a drink for my mates, no big deal.’

‘Aye, mates you’d sell down the river, you Lundy. I had a call from that Donnan creep myself, but I told him to go fuck himself.’

Oh God. They’ve worked out exactly who he’s been talking to.

‘I never gave names. I just played him, I fed him a load of keek,’ he says, guilt spreading over him, knowing he referenced the bombing plan.

Mackers grabs him by the collar. He can see Martha looking the other way, not wanting to be a witness.

'Let's go,' says Mackers.

Mackers and his two henchmen Jonty and Flint push him out through the back door into the entry.

'I didn't tell him anything,' he protests, though he knows it's too late.

It's dusk, the sky is a deep blue with a few lavender clouds tinged with orange. When did it become night? It seems to him he only just arrived in the pub and the sun should still be splitting the stones. He's not scared exactly. His mind and body feel as if they are drifting in a dream turned dark. But he wonders how the hell, in the space of a few short hours, he ended up here.