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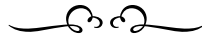
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1



The Beach

NORTHERN IRELAND, 1983

W*here is that damned Arab with my guns?*
She searched the horizon. *My soldiers are freezing.*
How much more of this can they take?

She was worried about her adoptive father, too. Tom's boat was somewhere out there in the cold darkness again, looking for the Arab's ship. This was the third night in a row. She'd already lost her birth father; she didn't want to lose this one to the sea.

Her eight soldiers—all young women—were watching the shoreline for any sign of trouble. She had them divided into two squads, under team leaders Hawk and Mongoose. Kathleen's heart, too, was divided. Part of her could sympathize with her commandos. Another part was steeled to the mission.

"Me diddies is ice, Mother," said a voice on the military radio. Kathleen, code named Mother, recognized Bridie's Dublin twang.

"Mine, too!" another voice said with a giggle.

"Whist!" Mother admonished. "No guff on the radio!" Order must be maintained, no matter how she felt.

Bridie smirked at Kathleen's reprimand. The fighters revered

their young leader, but after three days and nights of bivouac, they were tired. And damned cold. Discipline threatened to break down just a bit as frustration set in. A little snap from Mother and her soldiers were back in the moment. Mother knew this was all it would take; she trained them to be tough.

A November gale screamed in from the Irish Sea. The fierce wind blew the sky clean of clouds. The surf was thrown high in the air, and it slammed against the black stone beach. The roar was deafening.

Braced against the icy wind, Kathleen stared out across the water toward the black horizon. Usually she liked the sharp smell of salt air, but tonight it seemed acrid.

Where the hell is he?

She searched the water for a signal. It was ebony ink out there. The only hint of where the sky ended and the sea began was the dim twinkle of a few stars.

Kathleen was twenty years old, petite, with a body kept solid by a strict regimen of martial arts and proper diet. Her gray-blue eyes could be gentle and tender, they could be hard and unforgiving; but, always, they held a glint of sadness, and rage.

Kathleen O'Toole's real name wasn't known to many beyond the seaside town of Glenarm. In a cemetery on the outskirts there were three O'Toole headstones. Many O'Toole gravestones dotted Northern Ireland cemeteries, but her own mom, dad, and big brother Tim were in the Glenarm graves.

AS A YOUNG CHILD KATHLEEN was anything but sad and knew nothing of rage or revenge. In those days, she preferred to climb trees than play with dolls, and her big brother Tim was her best friend.

A photo of herself and her brother, taken on Kathleen's seventh birthday, was her favorite and she carried it always. The picture

showed her wearing Tim's birthday gift: an American cowboy outfit complete with chaps, red boots, jeans, and two pearl-handled six-shooters slung low and forward for a quick draw. A ten-gallon hat of white showed she was a good guy; the fancy braid all around the edge and the dangling tassels said this good guy was still a girl.

In the picture, she is standing next to her brother, her feet wide-spread in a defiant pose. Her fists are on her hips, elbows out, and on her face she is wearing the best imitation of a tough-guy scowl a seven-year old angel can make. Later, she learned Tim saved a long time to buy her that outfit.

One night, when she was fifteen and her brother nineteen, Kathleen heard Tim and his friends in the back yard. Their voices were low, so Kathleen knew this must be important.

Ever the snoop, she slipped out the front door, went around the side of the house, and crept under a bush just in time to hear Tim say, "All right, then. It's time for us to show *why* we're in the Irish Republican Army. We'll get together in the cellar at yer house, Barry, to work out the hit. Two o'clock okay? Yer people asleep by then?"

"Most nights by ten."

"All right. Two o'clock it is. See ye're not followed."

Kathleen hurried back inside and waited for Tim in the kitchen.

"You're IRA!"

Tim froze, shock on his face. "Yer ears are too big, little sister!"

"I'll never tell. I swear it!"

"Some things ye're just better off not knowin'."

"Can I go with? I promise I'll not say a word."

"Go with?"

"I heard. Whatever it is, I want to be in on it."

Tim laughed. "Ye'll do no such thing."

"I want to go!"

"And I said ye'll not be after goin'." He put his arm around his

sister's shoulders and added in a gentle voice, "Ye'll stay at home, where a kid belongs, and all."

"All right, then, Mr. IRA! See if I care!" She stuck her tongue out at him and ran to her room.

Later that night, it turned out Tim wasn't as good at not being followed as he expected his friends to be. All the way to Barry's house, Kathleen tagged along stealthily. She could have waited ahead, as she knew very well where Barry O'Sullivan lived, but it was more fun to play "I Follow." Long practice through the years had made her good at it.

Peeking through the cellar window, she saw the group huddled around a table. Tim was saying something. He looked so bold, so much a grownup. Kathleen wanted to be part of it. The door was right there beside the window. *If he catches me, he'll be really mad! Maybe I should go home,* she thought.

Kathleen tried the door. It wasn't locked. Without making a sound, she eased it open a crack.

It was Tim's voice, and he sounded angry: "They grab at every girl who walks by, for Chrissakes! Now they've raped two girls from Dublin. It's got to stop. They have to be taught a lesson. What the fek are we, then, if we let those bastards take our women? Are we in the IRA or not?"

Tim pounded his fist on the table as he added, "It's time for killin' some British soldiers, I say! We'll hit their Dublin outpost. Anybody wants out, it'll be okay. No one's gonna hold it against ya, then."

"I'm in."

"Me, too."

A chorus of like replies came from around the table.

"Ye understand, maybe not all of us is comin' out of this alive, then," Tim said. "We could all of us be in deep shit, as of right now."

Startled at hearing that maybe her brother might be killed, Kathleen stumbled. Her foot slipped and the door hit the wall with a bang.

There was a mad scramble at the table. In seconds, guns were pointing at Kathleen.

“Wait! Don’t shoot!” Tim screamed as he recognized his little sister beneath her getup of big dark glasses, black pullover, black jeans, black (though shiny) shoes, red socks because she didn’t have black ones, and an oversized baseball cap—black, of course—with her thick auburn hair tucked all up inside.

One of the young men at the table screamed, “Damn!” and lunged toward Kathleen. She jumped in alarm. The glasses slipped, the big cap fell off, and her long hair spilled.

Tim grabbed the man by the arm and swung him hard against a wall. “Ye don’t touch her!”

Tim pointed his finger at Kathleen. Fire in his eyes, he yelled, “Get-yerself-*home!*”

Kathleen turned and ran hard, headed anywhere but home, trying to keep back the tears. *I’ve mucked up real bad this time.*

In a few minutes, she found herself in front of Glenarm’s Catholic rectory.

I’ll tell a priest what I did. The good priest would calm her, she thought, maybe quote soothing words from the Bible and tell her Tim would forget all about it by daybreak.

A priest will calm me? All I ever got from any priest was an angry look.

Her brother said priests didn’t like her face because it was too pretty. She wondered what the priests really saw in her that made them scowl; she didn’t believe her face was all *that* pretty, so they must have been scowling at something else they saw in her, something unforgivable. She didn’t believe Tim would ever get over what she’d done this night, either, and he was her life.

Kathleen sat down on the rectory steps, laid her face on her knees, and wept.

She wished she could do like other girls and talk to her mom about this. *Ma and Da would never understand. They don't even know Tim is IRA. What'll I do, then?*

AFTER HE'D SENT KATHLEEN away, Tim restored order. The one he pushed against the wall squawked a lot and needed his feathers smoothed. Tim reassured everyone that his little sister would keep quiet, and the meeting concluded with a renewed pledge that the British soldiers who'd raped the two Dublin girls would die. The cell would attack the Dublin army post at dawn in five days.

THE PHONE RANG at the Real Order of Orange Protestant headquarters in Dublin. The man on duty recorded the call. "This is Ros Doyle from the Tim O'Toole cell. He plans to kill some British soldiers."

"Oh, *does* he now?" the man said.

"Aye. Will ye call the Brits?"

"Hm. Maybe. Or maybe we'll take out this trash ourselves."

TIM WALKED HOME with a big problem on his mind. It wasn't about his plan to attack a British army post. He was worried about his sister. Her snooping could get her hurt.

As soon as he entered the house Tim went to Kathleen's bedroom door. "Katie?" he called softly. No answer.

"Katie, I just want to say—" He pushed the door open and saw her bed hadn't been slept in. He flew out of the house.

Which way? He remembered once when Kathleen was a little girl she'd run away from home and gone to the rectory. His heart went out to her when he found her sitting there, crying. Tim shook his

head and, with a smile, he extended a hand to her. “Katie, me girl, what *am* I goin’ to *do* with ye, then? *Hmm?*”

“I’m sorry, Timmy.”

“Come on, then, Katie. Let’s go home, now, and we’ll just talk it all out.”

And as they walked home in the gathering daylight, Tim’s arm around his kid sister’s shoulders, he gave her his best big-brother talk. Even before he started his little lecture, Kathleen knew she wasn’t going to like it.

“Ye’ve got to stop bein’ such a bleedin’ tomboy, then. Ye must stop wastin’ yer time followin’ me around, and all.”

This wasn’t what Kathleen wanted to hear, but her brother’s arm made her feel safe.

“Ye must start behavin’ more like a girl, then, and less like a guy, ye know. Yer growin’ up now, I’m after sayin’. Almost a woman, or I’m damned.”

Kathleen looked up into her brother’s stern but gentle eyes. She loved those eyes, but she didn’t like where this conversation was headed.

“Ye must start thinkin’, girl, about havin’ a good Catholic boyfriend. God willin’, someday you’ll get married and have kids of yer own, then.”

“But I don’t *want* a boyfriend, Timmy. I don’t *want* to grow up and get married. I . . .” She turned her head away, embarrassed, and added in a low voice, “I just want to be like you.”

Tim stopped. He laughed and asked, “And what would God think of ye, lass, if ye don’t marry and have kids, hmm? Come on, then, let’s go home now.” He started walking again.

Kathleen hung back. “Wait, Tim!”

He turned to face her.

“What was that I heard, then? About killin’ British soldiers? And what about you being IRA, and all?”

“The less ye know about that, child, the better off ye’ll be. I’m sorry ye heard any of it at all. Killin’s a dirty business and whoever must do it has a dirty soul. Now come on, then.”

That morning, Kathleen sat in her bed, worried about what she’d overheard. *Who can I tell?* A voice deep within her answered: *Absolutely no one!* She knew that to tell could put her brother in prison.

But Tim might get killed. Next she thought: *Maybe the deal won’t happen. Yes! The whole thing will get called off. I just know it!*

Her thoughts drifted. She was angry with Tim; in fact, she was furious.

Stop being a tomboy so’s I can get a boyfriend? Hah! I can get any damn boyfriend I want! Right now! Just as I am! In fact, I’ll do it first thing Monday! I’m almost sixteen years old. It’s high time! And doin’ it is no big deal, anyway. I know scads of girls that have done it. Yes, I’ll do it! So there, Mr. Tim IRA Smartass!

WHEN KATHLEEN SET OUT for school the following Monday, she walked with an angry, determined stride. She would prove Tim wrong. She was sure she could. She decided her boyfriend would be Danny Quinn, the good looking captain of the school’s soccer team, The Glenarm Raiders. He had always been interested in her, but Kathleen had constantly snubbed him.

She approached Danny at his locker as school was letting out.

“Hello, Danny.” She gave him her best smile.

“Well, hello back at ya, then.” He was surprised she was talking to him.

“Will you come for a walk with me? I think we should get to know each other better. Much better. Interested?”

“Am I *interested*? Is the Pope interested in *heaven*?” Danny thanked the good Lord. This was his lucky day.

Kathleen led Danny to a supposedly secret place she’d heard about. It was under the bleachers, and Danny knew it well.

“Sit down here with me on the grass, then,” she said. Danny was so eager, he nearly tripped over his own feet.

“Do you think anyone might come along?” she asked as she leaned near him to look down the way. She leaned a little more, and her breast pressed firmly against Danny’s arm. She didn’t move away but turned her face up to his as she closed her eyes and parted her lips. She knew exactly how; from movies and from the tattered paperback she kept under her mattress. Danny thanked the Lord again as he leaned toward her. Her hair gave a light scent, a little like roses Danny thought. Their lips met. Danny reached for her breast. She didn’t resist.

Kathleen lay back on the grass and drew Danny down to her. Nervous someone might come along, they didn’t fully undress. She took Danny’s hand and placed it inside her panties.

“Like that, Danny,” she whispered, moving his hand for him. The paperback helped her practice, alone in her bed, in the dead of night way under the covers where she dared to think that maybe—just maybe—God couldn’t see.

“Like this?”

“That’s fine, Danny! Fine! Mmm! Yes! Right there! Yes, yes! Gently, slowly!”

Kathleen was eager. The lad was amazed things progressed so far so fast. He was a little nervous as he unzipped his pants and freed himself.

“I’m ready! Do it! Do it now!” Kathleen whispered as she wrapped her legs around Danny.

Danny pushed. He pushed a bit harder. She gasped.

“Did I hurt ye, darlin’?” Danny asked as he pulled back.

“It’s my first time, and all.”

“Oh, Jayzus!” Danny complained. “I’m after wishin’ somebody else done it to ye before me, then.”

“It’s all right, Danny! Go ahead!” Kathleen whispered in his ear.

She wrapped her legs tighter around his hips and pushed up against him, hard. Surprised by the pain that shot through her, she stiffened and bit her lip.

“I’m stoppin’!” Danny gasped. “I heard about a guy who done it with a virgin, and she lost so much blood, they had to call an ambulance.”

“And were you *there*, then? Did you actually *see* that, then?”

“Well, no, but Joe Martin told me—”

“And Joe Martin’s a big fat liar! Now come *on*, then, Danny. I want you *so* much!”

He pushed again, a little deeper this time. He felt a hot trickle.

“I’m gonna pull out.”

“No!” Kathleen replied and pulled herself tighter to him. “*Do* it!”

He pushed all the way in, then stopped. “Is it all *right*, darlin’?”

“Yes, for the love o’ *Jayzus!* Will you just *do* it, for God’s sake!”

“Okay, okay!”

Kathleen could see Danny’s passion was racing. She’d heard he was too fast. *Is he gettin’ finished already, then?*

She heard him whisper, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with—”

“What the hell are you praying for?”

He gasped, “If I say prayers, it helps me, you know, to go longer. Okay?”

Kathleen shrugged.

“Okay, Danny. Fine.” she whispered. She was feeling no more

pain. “You go ahead and pray, then.” She pulled him tighter. “Say the whole rosary.”

Danny closed his eyes, his brow furrowed. “. . . and give us this day our daily bread . . .”

Kathleen noticed Danny had his prayers mixed up.

Soon he was thrusting faster. Kathleen sensed his praying wouldn’t help much longer. She heard, “. . . our trespasses as we forgive . . . we forgive . . . forgive. . . .”

His torso and legs went rigid. He threw his head back, his eyes squeezed shut, and a grimace on his face. Danny shuddered once, once more, and a third time.

It was over.

As she rearranged her clothes Kathleen thought, *That was nice, but it wasn’t the rocket ride to the moon some girls brag about. I wonder if there really is such a thing.*

FROM WAY OUT ON THE WATER, Kathleen caught the dim flashlight signal she’d waited three days to see.

She wanted to believe it wasn’t her mind playing tricks on her. Her body ached from lack of sleep. *I’m wild tired. Was it the blink of a star, then? Low, near the water?*

Again she saw it. *That’s no bloody star!*

Her heart leapt! Her fingers were stiff with cold, clumsy, and the flashlight almost fell as she rushed to return the signal. A second time she returned it. From the water came confirmation.

Finally, after three bloody days, the damned guns are here!

“The bread is in the oven,” she said into her radio.

Her commandos tensed.

There could be a fight if this gun buy went sour. Behind the tension, though, there was a sense of relief. If the deal went down as it should, they would soon go home. Some to a worried mother

and father, some to a husband and kids, some to the arms of a lover—always kept a careful secret in Northern Ireland so the Catholic Church won't come knocking at the door. Literally.

In a few minutes, the waves rolled the flat-bottomed motorboat over the shoal line, out some hundred meters from where Kathleen stood at the water's edge. She spoke into the radio, "Brew the coffee."

The muscular woman in the delivery van parked thirty meters behind her answered, "Yes, Mother." A good soldier, she'd already made sure her M60 machine gun was ready. The oversized satchel beside it contained one hundred thousand dollars, American.

The waves rolled high, their tops whipped away as foam. No moon shone this night, but by dim starlight Kathleen could see the vague outline of two men gripping the gunwales of a small heavy boat as it lurched on the sea. The smaller man and owner of the boat was Tom Mulcahy, her dear adoptive dad ever since her own father's death. She knew Tom better than she had known her first father. Her real parents had been reserved in manner, polite to one another but a bit distant. Tom was older than her father but younger at heart. He was stern as senior in command of the local IRA chapter, but always gentle and fun-loving with Kathleen, his protégée—and the beloved daughter he and Peg had never had.

Kathleen smiled as she remembered how pleased and proud Tom was when she presented him with his birthday present last month, a Beretta with underarm holster. A few days later, Peg complained, laughing, that he wore the damn thing to bed.

Kathleen wore the same sidearm and holster. But, because it showed authority, she also liked to carry on her shoulder the classic Kalashnikov automatic rifle, also known as the AK47.

The Arab was bringing her the IRA's purchase of three hundred

new 74s, much improved over the magnificent 47 prototype, and Kathleen was eager to try out this wonder gun.

She had pointed her rifle in anger only once. An IRA operative became determined, with no encouragement from her, that she would be his sex toy. Kathleen pushed his hands away and screamed at him. When he wouldn't stop, she sprayed the floor in front of him with a burst of gunfire. He vanished through the window behind him without bothering to open it.

The only time Kathleen had ever had sex was that one time with Danny. She got hit hard with guilt over it the same day, and she vowed sex before marriage would never happen again. God's punishment was too great. Far greater than the sin.

During the next four years, she found little incentive to end her celibacy, but she decided if she ever did have another man before marriage—as unlikely as that was—she wouldn't be at it with some bloke who backed her into a corner, like the spalpeen she'd scared off that day with a blast from her AK47. She would choose who, where, when and why. When it came to men, Kathleen would always be in charge. She was clear about that.

The stranger in the boat she knew only by reputation as “the Arab.”

She wondered if he was armed. Mulcahy had decided he wouldn't pat him down, in deference to political courtesy. Kathleen thought that a bad decision and had said so at the time.

“Bring out the jam now. The bread will soon be on the table,” Kathleen radioed the woman in the van.

“Yes, Mother. Coming.”

The machine gun and the large bag of money were a load too heavy for many men. The big woman carried both easily to the edge of the wooded area near the beach. There, she set up the M60 on its tripod and lay the money bag beside it. Carrying them

brought a warmth to her well-muscled arms and legs, and she smiled with satisfaction at her body's great strength, congratulating herself once more for years of routine weight lifting. She connected the gun's cartridge belt and lay down behind it in the snow to make a final adjustment to the sights. Last, she pulled back on the loading shuttle and let it snap the first round into the chamber. If that gun merchant wanted a fight, she was ready. She almost hoped he would.

The boat made a loud scrape on the rocky bottom. Mulcahy jumped out with a splash and pulled on the frayed old bow line to haul up the heavy boat. The man in the rear of the boat stood up and stepped out onto the shiny stones. He wore a backpack over rough seaman's clothes.

Hmph. Doesn't impress me much, Kathleen thought.

He walked up to her and swept off his cap with a flourish, flashed a large toothy grin and made a shallow bow.

Saints preserve us! The bastard thinks he's pretty! She never moved. Her face showed nothing.

And he doesn't look exactly Arab. He reminded her of an old-time movie actor whose name she couldn't recall, and whom she'd always disdained as overblown and thinly talented.

"Hello!" he shouted over the wind. He smiled again, and extended his hand. "I'm . . ." She ignored the proffered handshake. Her arms remained folded, her eyes locked on his in an angry glare. His smile turned to a frown. He felt insulted. All he could see of her face were gun-metal eyes. The extended hand balled up into a stiff fist as he returned it to his side.

"Something wrong, little girl?" he shouted over the crash of the surf in his best attempt at an Irish accent.

Oh, sweet Jaysus! Little girl, is it? And insulting the Irish way of

speaking! If he puts that hand out again, I'll show him what's bloody wrong! And he'll not be after using it for a long time!

Mulcahy understood what was going on, for he knew the lass well. He placed a hand under Kathleen's elbow. "Will ye have a word with me, then, Mother?" he shouted over the surf's roar. "And will ye, sir, just wait here for a moment, then? There's a good lad."

Kathleen and Mulcahy walked away from the thundering shoreline and back to the trees, near where the machine gunner lay concealed. Kathleen's mind was in turmoil.

"He's late!" Kathleen said with a stamp of her foot. "Damn it, he's three bloody days late!" She felt the heat of anger deep in her stomach—a sensation so familiar it almost felt good. In front of her soldiers she would never display this undisciplined side of her, but with her adoptive dad she knew she was safe.

"Aye, I know, Katie, I know. But he's not the devil, after all, now then is he? And he's got the guns on his ship. I went aboard. I saw them."

"Did you check the shipment? Are they the new seventy-fours?"

"Aye, of course, lass. I dug down and unwrapped two. They're genuine. Let's pay him and take delivery. Sun'll be up in a few hours, and he's got to be far off by then. So do we, for all of that."

Kathleen said nothing as she looked into Mulcahy's face for a long silent moment. She trusted his judgment. Her own, she knew, could get clouded by anger.

"Come on, lass. Let's bring him the money," Mulcahy said.

"You're right, Tom," Kathleen smiled. "As always." She walked to the machine gunner's lair, picked up the bag of money and carried it to the stranger.

Kathleen scowled at him. "One hundred thousand, American.

As agreed. Now bring me my damn guns!” she shouted against the wind.

The Arab looked from Mulcahy to Kathleen. He fixed her with a stare and said not a word. After a silence that seemed to go on forever, he chose three bundles of the money at random and riffled them to check for stuffing. Finding the payment genuine, he made two clicks of the transmit button on his belt radio. The signal told his ship, the *Thea*, to send in the motor launch with the guns.

A reply of three clicks would affirm; but his radio was silent.

He turned the volume all the way up and repeated the two clicks. Again silence.

The Arab’s radio barked, “Thea to Hyperion.” Voice communication meant trouble.

“Go ahead, Thea.”

“British task force, three ships. On site in about thirty minutes.”

The Arab calculated the ride back to the *Thea* would eat up the half hour window. *If there is some delay?* The plan for today did not include an engagement with a British task force.

He decided to take the contingency. The *Thea* would pick him up in Belfast. No time to deliver the weapons.

“Hyperion to Thea.”

“Go ahead, Hyperion.”

“Go to flank speed at once. *Get the hell out of there!*”

“Wilco,” the OD confirmed. He knew how much the skipper regretted it when, on rare occasions, he was stuck on land and missed a game of cat and mouse, especially when, as in this case, the cat didn’t stand a chance.

“I’m afraid I have to return this to you, Miss,” the Arab shouted over the wind as he handed Kathleen the satchel of money.

“*What?*” She let the bag fall before her feet and turned her Kalashnikov on him.

“Whoa!” He threw his hands up over his head.

“Easy, lass,” Mulcahy said and tilted the barrel of her gun toward the ground.

The Arab said, “My ship is being hunted by a British task force. Which means delivery of the merchandise is impossible. I’ve returned your money. May I put my hands down now?”

Kathleen glanced at Mulcahy. His expression said, *Let it go!*

“Put ’em down,” she said in a voice full of mistrust.

“Hawk to Mother, come in!”

“Mother here, Hawk.”

“Movement!”

“Where?”

“Merlyn Rock!”

The ancient rock, bigger than a two-story house, was north at water’s edge and even in the best of weather the surf pounded it with the force of madness.

“In the water?”

“Yes. I thought I saw a raft. Something got flipped by a breaker. It was big, and flat.”

“Can you get a closer look?”

“I’ll try.”

“Mongoose, did you copy?”

“Roger.”

Kathleen thought, *What the hell could this be? Probably not a wild animal. Most are hibernating. And animals have better sense. At Merlyn Rock the breakers kill.*

“Tom, go cover the van,” Kathleen said. “We can’t afford to lose it.” Her real concern, though, was the possibility that in a gunfight she might lose him. “Right,” Mulcahy replied. He suspected her real motive, but she was mission commander.

EARLIER THAT DAY in London there was much interest in the guns and the ship. “Sir, we have a photo of the, uh, *freighter*, sir. And a dossier from upstairs.” The communications technician was in the basement of MI6’s War Office, Britain’s center for military strategy. “Upstairs” was a reference to MI6’s team of crack analysts—rarely wrong.

In peacetime, MI6 monitored national threats to Great Britain and linked Scotland Yard to the CIA, France’s *Sûreté*, Israel’s *Mosad*, and other intelligence services throughout the free world.

Rear Admiral George Binkstrom, Her Majesty’s Royal Navy, was Officer on Deck.

“Some problem about the identification?” Binkstrom asked.

“Well, sir, it’s bloody well not like any freighter *I’ve* ever seen before. Our surveillance plane got a quick snapshot before the fog rolled in. Here, sir, take a look.”

“Hmm.”

Binkstrom read the dossier. According to the MI6 analysts, this was the famous, or infamous, mystery ship he’d heard about. With a quick response, the ship and her captain might just be Binkstrom’s plums for the plucking. Any contraband on board would be an extra treat.

Binkstrom knew where he could get the quick response that could turn the trick. He radioed an old school chum, captain of a small flotilla in that area.

“Captain Maddox here.”

“Good morning, Maddox! This is Binkstrom over at the War Office.” He sounded chummy.

“Binky! You old sea dog! How are you?” A flotilla captain does not call an admiral an old sea dog on military radio. But Maddox and Binkstrom graduated in the same class at war college, and they had quaffed a few pints together in their younger years.

"I'm fine, Peter! Fine! Yes, it's been a long time, hasn't it? Listen, I have a bit of news. We just got a photo on the wire from Corsewall Point."

"Oh?"

"Yes. A snapshot we took about an hour ago of a renegade ship."

"What is she? Freighter?"

"Well, yes, I do believe she *is* a freighter, Peter, *of sorts*. But she's not *built* like a freighter at all. More like one of those speed boats the drug runners use in the Carib."

"All right, then, she's a small fast craft, probably carrying a bit of exotic cargo. Not a problem, I'd say, unless she's *so* fast that—

"Fast she is, I'm sure, Peter. But small she isn't."

"How's that, Binky?"

"As best as our analysts can judge, she's far too bloody big for a sports craft. Our people have measured the size of the whitecaps, factored in wind conditions, altitude, the pilot's visuals, and well, Peter, this craft, this *warship*, I'm afraid it's the size of one of your destroyers! And probably more than twice as fast!"

"A hundred meters long, and . . . *moving at more than a hundred knots?*"

"Fraid so" Binkstrom said. "Can't *see* any guns. But there are some boxy shapes on deck. I'm sure that's where she hides them."

"*Hides* them?" In his experience, a ship of war displays her guns. Proudly. She doesn't hide them.

"Right. Hides them. She's designed for stealth as well as speed. Probably covered with a material like mylar or Teflon. Won't return radar. Any surface that *could* return a signal, like a steel gun barrel, is shielded.

"Our analysts think the big compartment on her poop deck is a helicopter hangar. That makes her a threat by air and by sea. She's lovely, though. Got a long bow that comes almost to a needle point

like an old pirate sloop. She's sleek and she's slick, Peter. In this photo she looks like a big plastic toy."

"Hmm. A stealth warship. What's she called? Do we know whose she is?"

"Yes, I just received all that from upstairs. Ship's name is Thea. Says here the owner is a modern pirate, munitions trader, smuggler, and sometimes-legit merchant. I've seen reports of this fellow and his Thea. He's been spotted in the Indian Ocean, the Black Sea, and the Aegean.

"Until today, though, I don't think MI6 knew he's in *our* waters. Half the navies of the world have chased the Thea at one time or another. I've heard she likes to move under cover of darkness or heavy fog. I don't think anyone's ever gotten close."

"Do we know what this fellow is up to in *our* pond?"

"Gun delivery to the IRA, is what upstairs thinks. I'd bet the coordinates have already gone to Royal Air Command. RAC will try a capture, Peter. But I want you to find that ship before they do. I want the whole package."

"I gather I'm to take the ship . . . *or sink her*, of course."

"Well, before I got these orders I'd have said yes, if she won't surrender, blow her out of the water. But now I'm afraid a fight is out."

"How so?" Militarily, this made no sense.

"Apparently, our people want this vessel in one piece, and everyone on it very much alive. You are to search for her, and try to give chase. My hunch is, she'll see you and be off like a shot. Nevertheless, your orders are to try a capture. If you get close enough, you are to fire across her bow, but do not, I repeat, do *not*, engage the vessel in combat. If she fires back, you are to break off."

"*Break off*, Binky?" This was insufferable.

"I know it's galling, Peter. It would bloody well gall me, too. But

our navy and MI6 want to find out exactly how this craft is built and who built it. The *Thea* is to be captured if possible, but *not* damaged! Is that *clear*?

Binkstrom's voice was ice, the warmth of camaraderie frozen.

How the bloody hell do we catch a ship that does a hundred knots when our best speed is less than forty? was what Maddox wanted to say. Instead he replied icily, but with proper military bearing, "Aye, aye, *sir*."

The orders were clear. He was to look for a giant invisible speed boat that flew like the wind and might be armed like a destroyer. *If* he found her, his orders were to ask this ship, politely, to come along with him to the pokey. And he felt like a damn fool doing it.

CAPTAIN HOSSEINI WESSAM, the Officer of the Deck, the man in charge on the *Thea*, grinned as he turned down the volume on his scanner. There were no radio frequencies this jewel could not pick up. Captain Wessam glanced at his radar screen. Being invisible to another ship's radar didn't mean he couldn't see them with his. The *Thea*, he reflected with considerable pride, possessed what were probably the world's sharpest eyes *and* ears on any sea.

Like Maddox, Wessam, too, was told to avoid a fight. A warrior at heart, he didn't like the order any more than Maddox did. But, like Maddox, Wessam would obey.

BRITAIN'S HIGHLY SECRETIVE Special Air Services, or SAS, was widely regarded as one of the finest and best-trained special forces in the world. It was a model and teacher for many other nations' special forces, and justly commanded the respect of all other military arms of the British government.

The SAS paratrooper unit at Stranraer in Scotland was on alert. These might be the weapons reported stolen not long ago in

Czechoslovakia. To snag them on delivery to the IRA was an exciting possibility.

SAS's intel was conclusive, but before any mission could be launched, regulations required that final approval come from the War Office because that was the source of the enabling data.

When the call came in, Binkstrom told his technician, "Let it ring. It's not for us."

"But—"

"I said it's not for us. Got it?"

"Aye, aye, *sir*."

Binkstrom unplugged the phone. "In two hours, you can plug it back in."

And this was why SAS Brigadier Allan Rogers had to wait two hours to get authorization for his parachutists to take action—which was well after Maddox's flotilla of ships was on its way to the target.

Finally, as the War Room phone was plugged back in, Rogers did get through. Binkstrom gave him the clearance required by regulations, and then Rogers phoned the air strip and the ready room.

Within the hour, the SAS DC3 throttled down to a whisper as it approached the drop zone. The likelihood anyone on the ground could hear this incursion team was next to zero.

Binkstrom's delay of the SAS clearance failed to give Maddox the edge in this mission. Maddox lost the target and, in disgust, was headed back to port.

In the DC3, the ready light went from yellow to green. The Royal Marine Commandos stood. Each man checked the man next to him to make sure he was properly strapped into his parachute pack, black for this night jump.

Rogers went to the door. The green light began to blink. Time to

go. Rogers pulled open the jump hatch and locked it to the plane's bulkhead. The icy blast of wind that filled the plane was staggering.

He threw out a small parachute attached to the team's big rubber raft which would inflate automatically when it hit the water. He shouted to his men, "At two-second intervals, *jump!*" and he dove out the door. One after another, into the subzero slipstream his faithful team followed like lemmings.

The five men plunged through the blackness and soon were falling at 120 miles per hour. The ultra-short-range radio and tiny red light built into each man's helmet allowed the team to keep track of one another, and well-rehearsed body movements helped them stay in tight formation.

"A-way, a-way, *ho!*" Rogers called softly into his radio. Like a night flower eager to open its dark petals, the team peeled out six or seven meters from tight formation.

"We-pull-*now!*" he said, and the team yanked their rip cords in unison. The chutes blossomed into a five-sided black dahlia.

The men splashed as one into the icy Irish Sea. Unprotected in this water, a man would freeze to death in minutes. But these SAS paratroopers were insulated in their chemically heated wetsuits. Even head cover and face mask were caloric.

The men were unanimous that this thermal suit would never replace the warmth of a woman's thighs, but they were glad to have it keep them alive.

Moments after splashdown, the five soldiers were in their rubber boat, paddling over the waves and toward the shore line.

Rogers's waterproof map showed Merlyn Rock and, next to it to the north, an open stretch of rocky beach where MI6 said delivery of the guns would be made.

The SAS team would capture buyer, seller, money and merchandise. According to plan.

AUTOMATIC RIFLE FIRE CAME from Hawk's team to the south. A burst answered from the water.

Kathleen's radio blared, "Abort! Abort! Enemy in the water!"
More gunfire.

"*Your people?*" Kathleen yelled. She was ready to shoot the Arab.

"I swear not!" He clicked on his radio. "Hyperion to Thea."

"Go ahead, Hyperion."

"Belay seven! Belay seven, Hosseini! We're under attack! Small arms fire from the water. Flank speed to shore! Mind your keel! Unless you see a ship, your target is the big rock on the shore line. Signal when you're in range. I'll give you a flare. Fire for effect! Fire for effect!"

"Aye, aye, Skipper. Will you come aboard?"

"If I can. Now, *move it!*"

Squad One came off the high ground to the north and set up an intensive fire pattern south at water's edge. Squad Two fell back to the west, away from the water. Both groups fired nonstop, and IRA bullets whined off Merlyn Rock.

Kathleen grabbed the money bag. The Arab pulled out a handgun, a long-barreled semiautomatic. He snapped off a few shots toward the water but couldn't see any targets.

"*Come on! Come on! Follow me!*" Kathleen yelled at him.

She ran toward the van, the Arab close behind.

"Mongoose to Hawk."

"*Yeah! What?*" She was taking heavy fire and giving it back.

"I think we can keep their heads down. *Run for it!*"

Mongoose's team continued its protective fire pattern. Hawk's team dodged backward through a cover of darkness and foliage, and popped off random shots as they ran.

ROGERS HEARD ONLY FEMALE voices on his radio. *Who the hell are these people? Mission brief said fewer than ten. Got to be more.*

His troopers were taking fire from two directions, straight ahead to the west, and from their right, or north, along the water's edge.

Damn good shooting, too, Rogers observed. They seemed to be everywhere, moving all the time.

His men couldn't see well enough through the brush, even with their night vision gear, to pick out targets. They were pinned down behind the big rock and chest deep in icy water because their raft got flipped and pushed out of reach by the breakers.

Rogers wanted to go ashore to the south, but in that direction a cliff rose straight up, six or seven meters, and seemed to run as far as the eye could see.

Nobody told him he might need climbing gear.

Icy breakers kept knocking the men down. The cold sapped their strength. Rogers worried that the chemical heaters in their wetsuits wouldn't last much longer.

Kathleen moved back toward the van. To her right she saw one of the Hawk team grab at her thigh and go down with a scream. Another commando helped the wounded soldier back to her feet.

As soon as the Hawk team got safely behind the machine gun, the weapon began its clatter. The Mongoose team started a half-circle back away from the beach to also come in behind the machine gun.

Kathleen realized the big rock was protecting the enemy. She knew her people would start taking a lot of hits. The gun buy was already scrubbed. Now she had to get her people out. She fired constantly as she signaled her two teams into the van. Return fire from the water grew heavier.

From the corner of her eye, Kathleen saw the Arab run in a

crouch back toward the shore. About halfway there, he pulled a flare gun from his backpack and aimed it high beyond the rock.

Moments later a brilliant white light showered the water. Through the trees Kathleen saw a silver ball of flame hanging in the sky. Less than ten seconds later came the cannonade of five-inch ship's guns. Two rounds hit Merlyn Rock where the SAS troops were pinned, and the small arms fire from the water dropped to almost nothing.

The Arab ran back to the van, radio in hand.

"Thea to Hyperion."

"Go ahead, Thea."

"Sonar! We're painted!"

"Take seven!" the Arab yelled into his radio. "*Go, go, go, go!*"

As he turned his ship, Wessam took one more shot at Merlyn Rock and missed. The round buried itself in a large tree about six feet from the van.

The Arab made a mental note to ask the supplier—a Turkish broker who bought all his goods from China—why one of his five-inch projectiles didn't explode on impact. That it would have killed them all if it had gone off was beside the point.

From the water came a deep whine as the *Thea's* turbines revved for speed away from the coast, her goal the misty Irish Sea.

Kathleen's troops were all in the van. The Arab stood a few meters away, looking at Kathleen as she stood at the van door. *Can't very well leave him, what with his ship gone and all*, she thought. "Well, don't just stand there! Come on!" she yelled. The Arab grinned and jumped aboard.

Mulcahy kept the gas pedal to the floor as the old van rocketed down the bumpy dirt road out of the woods and back toward Glenarm.

Kathleen turned to check on her wounded soldier.

“How’re you doing, Bridie?”

“Hurts like hell,” Bridie said. She looked scared and was trying hard not to cry. One soldier supported Bridie’s head in her lap while another held her hand. Hawk cut away the left leg of Bridie’s trousers to expose a hole in her thigh. A tourniquet had stopped most of the bleeding.

Hawk smiled at Kathleen and said, “She’ll be fine. It went clean through, missed the bone and main artery. The morphine should take effect soon.”

With her free hand, Bridie made a gesture of despair. She smiled through her tears as she said to Kathleen, “I’m sorry to be such a baby. Can’t seem to help myself.”

“Now don’t you worry about *that*,” Kathleen said. “You go ahead and cry, lass. It’ll do you good. And you’re still gonna look great in a mini skirt.”

Bridie wasn’t so sure about that.

THREE FIVE-INCH ROUNDS hit Merlyn Rock. Rogers and two of his men were dead. The two survivors were dazed and battered by surf. One bled from a head wound where a slice of rock peeled a wide trough in his scalp.

He shook his head to clear it, and with his sleeve he kept wiping the watery blood from his eyes.

The one who wasn’t injured spoke into the small radio pinned to his shoulder.

“SAS to HMS Oak.”

“This is Oak,” came the response from the submarine. “That you, Rogers? What the bloody hell’s going on?”

“Sergeant Peterson here. Brigadier Rogers is dead. Two survivors. Me and Sergeant Thomas. Our life raft is lost. No prisoners. Send a pickup.”

In the debriefing, the conflict in orders and the escape of the mystery ship were questioned. The submarine captain was told not to fire on the mystery vessel, but when the SAS people came under fire he was supposed to support them. When asked why he didn't shoot, he said the target raced in on a zigzag course, fired, and raced out again. He managed to ping her twice, but she was gone too fast for a shot.

"What the hell *was* it, big as she was and moving so fast?" the sub's captain wanted to know.

A FEW HOURS REMAINED until daybreak when the van pulled into Glenarm. The wounded soldier was first to be dropped at a medical safehouse called Doctor Delaney's where she would receive advanced care. The other soldiers were driven to their homes and, last, Kathleen and Tom brought the Arab home with them.

Peg answered the door.

"Ah, ye're home!" she said with a breath of relief.

Mulcahy bussed his wife on the cheek, muttered "Mornin' Peg," and walked in. In the doorway, Kathleen said, "Mornin', Peg. This is—"

"I'm known as the Arab, ma'am," he said with a slight bow.

"Ye must all be froze, right enough. I've kept the fire up, and there's hot tea. We won't be havin' any. Keeps us awake," Peg said with nonchalance as she adjusted the hair at the back of her head. "Is there anythin' else the two of ye'd be after needin', then, before I'm back in the scratcher with old Tom here?"

Kathleen laughed as she pulled off her heavy coat and cap, and shook out her thick hair. "I'm sure not, Peg. You're too kind. Thank you." She took the Arab's coat and hung it with her own in a closet.

"Good night, then," Peg said. "And to ye, too, sir." She shot a

sly glance at Kathleen and curtsied to the tall good-looking stranger, who made another shallow bow in return. “Now ye don’t be long, Tom,” she said to her husband as she went up the stairs with a smile.

Mulcahy took Kathleen in his arms for a hug. “Silly woman, that Peg. Are ye all right then, child?”

“I’m fine, Tom. A bit tired is all.”

“And ye,” he said with warmth to the Arab. “If ye wasn’t with us on that beach tonight, I’m hatin’ to think what—”

“We’re alive. All of us,” The Arab said as he put a friendly hand on Mulcahy’s shoulder. He glanced at Kathleen. “It’s all that matters tonight.”

“Aye,” Mulcahy said. “And right proud I am to have ye in me home. ‘Tis right welcome ye are, and all.”

“Thank you, sir. You are a gentleman.”

Mulcahy shook hands with the Arab and turned to Kathleen, “Ye’ll show the gent his room, then? Peg’s makin’ up the bed. Be ready in a minute.”

“Right,” Kathleen said. “We’ll just sit here by the lovely fire and have our tea. Good night.”

The parlor was dominated by a huge fireplace of fieldstone slabs, its hearth almost high enough to stand in. A fire of dried oak gave the room a pleasant warmth and aroma. In front of the fireplace was a love seat, and a long low table. On it was a dish of chocolates. Kathleen noticed the Arab studying them. A strong interest in a dish of fancy chocolates didn’t fit her idea of this rough man. She would more have expected to see him sink his teeth into a leg of wild boar roasted over an open fire, or maybe he’d rip into it raw.

“Chocolates fascinate you, do they?” she asked, trying hard not to smile.

“Yes, as a matter of fact they do. Good ones, that is. If I’m not mistaken, these are Butlers from right here in Ireland.”

“I believe they are.” She paused. “You seem an aficionado.”

“I’m hardly an expert,” he replied, looking up at Kathleen with a modest smile. “But I think this one is a walnut ganache,” he said, pointing, “and this a butter praline, and this is a hazelnut slice.”

“Have one?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” the Arab replied. “Now let’s see . . .” he bent over the dish and pondered his choice. He took one and smiled up at his hostess. She seemed amused.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m sorry. It’s not what I expected of a gun runner.”

“You think you can know a man inside out in just one evening? The truth is, when it comes to chocolate, I simply melt,” he said with a careless air, and with that he popped the chocolate into his mouth.

The Arab smiled again and licked his finger tips.

“Another?” Kathleen offered.

He shook his head. “Thanks, but no. Good things are best taken slowly. That way, the pleasure lasts.”

Kathleen blushed. She felt the heat in her cheeks and mentally kicked herself for letting it show.

At either side of the table were two small upholstered chairs. Here Kathleen and the Arab chose to sit, some distance apart.

For a long time they were silent. They sipped their tea and watched the fire, with a glance at one another from time to time.

Kathleen had to admit he was good looking, dark, mysterious. She saw his gracious manner with Tom and Peg, a certain Old-World charm. And his fondness for chocolates spoke of a gentleness to the man’s nature. Apparently, she thought, he wasn’t afraid to show that side of himself—at least a little. Kathleen recognized

she'd never known any man quite like this one. Nevertheless, she was determined to remain angry with him for making her wait three days in the cold. *And, she reminded herself, strangers are not to be trusted. Especially men.*

The only sounds were the fireplace's friendly crackle and the wind at the shutters. The silence seemed to fill the room with something uncomfortable.

Kathleen spoke first. "And what do I call you, then?"

"Omar."

Kathleen laughed. *He could have come up with a better name than that.*

"Omar the tent maker?"

"Sure," he said with a chuckle. "Tent maker. Gun runner. Chocolateer. Whatever you like." A brief pause. "And what do I call you?" he asked in a gentle voice. His earlier harsh manner seemed gone. Kathleen wanted to hold onto her anger, keep it handy. She turned the cup of tea in her hands, pressing its warmth into her fingers.

"I'm . . . Kathleen." She intended to throw her name at his face like a stone. But to her surprise, she spoke in a soft voice, almost a whisper.

Conversation wavered, like the fireplace flames that smoldered down and sparked up again.

"I'd like to finish up our . . . transaction," Kathleen said.

"Oh, yes," Omar replied, as though being reminded of something that had grown unimportant.

Kathleen thought his tone strange. "When can you arrange delivery? Again." she said, her manner suggesting clearly that he had fouled up the transaction by permitting the British to find him.

"How about three days from now, say three in the morning, just a bit southwest of Bushmills? Good beach there."

“You know that country?” Kathleen asked in surprise.

“I once visited the Bushmills distillery. Best whiskey in the world.”

“Our whiskey and our chocolates. Anything else you like about Ireland?” Kathleen asked with a laugh.

Omar looked at Kathleen a long time before he answered in a low but warm tone, “In time, possibly.”

Kathleen felt herself blush. She looked away from him as she answered just above a whisper, “Sunup. I’ll be there. With the cash.”

There followed a long silence. A log shifted softly as it burned. Kathleen looked over at Omar. He seemed to be dozing off.

She had sat before a crackling fire in this fireplace many times, and always with pleasure, but tonight for some reason the fire brought painful memories.

Five years before, when she was only a few days shy of sixteen, she’d known another kind of fire. That fire had charred her soul. Much later, probing her soul’s ashes, she never could find the strong faith she once had enjoyed as an innocent Catholic girl. That was dead cinders. God was a cruel murderer, and she would have nothing more to do with Him.

She began to drift off to sleep herself, her thoughts drawn back to that afternoon, on her way home from school, after sex with Danny under the bleachers.

One last corner to turn and she would be on her street.

What would she tell her parents about why she was late? Would her brother Tim read her face? He thought he was so smart, and him only four years older. Some day she would—

A loud radio voice came from around the corner.

A short burst of static, and: “Signal ten. Strength four. Upper Waterford Road, niner-five-three.”

Nine fifty-three? That's my house! She ran around the corner. The police radio barked again: "Residence of Aidan and Cliona O'Toole." Kathleen almost fainted at hearing her parents' names.

On the roof of a black car, blue lights flashed on and off. They illuminated the next car's door and made the painted words seem to blink: *POLICE. POLICE.*

A big fire truck stood in front of her house, a smaller bomb squad truck nearby.

Kathleen's chest turned to pain as she looked at her house. Much of the front was exploded out, pieces of it blown everywhere.

She saw a great black hole four times bigger than the front door. Deep inside the house, flames roiled.

The blackness of the hole invaded her like a phantom. It settled between her shoulders, made its own black hole in her back. The phantom began to push her to the blazing house.

Oh, Dear God! she prayed.

Toward the horror, Kathleen ran, at first with wooden legs, then faster and faster, her arms outstretched for her family. She tried to scream, but her throat choked with pain. In the distance a siren wailed.

Three firemen stood in the street near their truck, hosing down the house's roof. They didn't see Kathleen coming. As she flew past, one of them shouted, "Hey! *Ye*, there! *Stop!*" Kathleen leaped easily over the broad piece of lumpy brown canvas someone had laid in front of the house.

She sprinted for the hole of black smoke and fire. She would get in there. She would find them. Her mother, father, Tim. She would—

Two firemen were smashing out the house's last window to hose the inside; they heard their comrade's shout and turned just in time to catch the girl who almost shot past them into the flames.

“*Whoa, now!*” one of them said as he grabbed Kathleen around the waist. “Whoa, now, lass! Ye can’t be after goin’ *in* there!” The two men held the girl as best they could, but she kicked and flayed at them. Twice, she almost broke free.

Her voice came back. The screams that poured out of her throat were pure hysteria. Her heart was breaking. A savage will drove her. She would get into the blackness of the hole, there where the fire was, there where she knew her family waited for her to come get them. She screamed. And screamed.

The ambulance pulled up and a medic jumped out, bag in hand. He injected a sedative into Kathleen’s arm.

Her whole body, her mind and her will, fought the drug for a few seconds.

She went limp. The firemen carried her away from the house.

They were careful to walk around the broad piece of brown canvas, the one Kathleen jumped over, without a thought, moments before. A thin curl of smoke drifted out from under the stiff and kinked material.

Under it lay the blasted and charred bodies of her mother, her father and her big brother Tim.

PEOPLE CAME to the funeral from everywhere. Kathleen saw a tall elderly gentleman at the back of the room. A stranger. He looked wealthy, foreign somehow, yet in some strange manner she felt she knew him. She wanted to ask him who he was, but she turned her head away for just a moment and he disappeared. She asked about the visitor, but it seemed no one had noticed the man. She never saw him again.

At the wake there was music, dancing, good food and ale, and lots of noisy celebration about the lives of the deceased. Tim’s

friends were there, including some who'd been in that cellar meeting just nights before.

Tom Mulcahy held his hand up for silence. His face was serious. "This is not the time or the place for words of anger and vengeance. Later for that. Our goodbyes will last forever. In our hearts, we hold the O'Toole family as though they were alive. Always here among us. And the last one who is alive, Kathleen, is now me own dear daughter. From this day forward, for as long as she likes, this girl lives with me and the missus. Let word go out from this place. Kathleen O'Toole now lives free under my protection. Beware to any and all who might do her harm, or even think it, for they are surely dead."

After the funeral, Mulcahy held Kathleen in his arms to console her. She cried until the tears wouldn't come any more. "If only I'd told," she whispered, holding her head in her hands. "They'd still be alive."

"Told?" Mulcahy asked.

"Told somebody that Tim was IRA. They might have stopped him. He'd be alive today. And Ma and Da, too. It's my fault they're all dead! It's my fault! I killed them!"

"No, child! No!" Mulcahy wrapped his arms around her again. "Never think that for a moment. Never! It's not yer fault at all! Ye did the right thing, tellin' no one. Ye were right, child. Ye were right!"

Kathleen heard the words but her heart doubted them.

Her heart was sure, though, that God had used the bomb to punish her for having sex with Danny. And she *hated* God for it.

TWO DAYS LATER, ON HER sixteenth birthday, Tom Mulcahy swore Kathleen O'Toole into the IRA. She took her oath in a rage, swearing not on a faith in God but on faith in her own power to

hate. She was determined to wreak vengeance on those Protestant bastards. And she would be part of the fight to drive the British out of her homeland.

OMAR HAD COME out of a light sleep and was thinking of adjusting the logs in the fireplace. He also was watching Kathleen's head and shoulders shift back and forth in her sleep. She apparently was having an unpleasant dream.

In her dream, Kathleen saw her mother and father, and with them Tim—always Tim, and all three wrapped in flames, coming toward her with their fiery arms outstretched as though to embrace her in their eternal suffering. Her head thrashed, horror and pain on her face, as she struggled to break free of the familiar nightmare.

What do they want of me? What do they want?

The answer screamed from the deepest part of her, as it always did: *Vengeance! Vengeance!*

Still asleep, Kathleen moaned. Omar jumped from his chair. He touched her arm and said softly. "Kathleen, wake up!"

She opened her eyes and looked up into Omar's face, so close to hers. His touch was warm; his deep brown eyes were filled with concern.

Coming out of the dream she had a sense of being alone, vulnerable. It seemed her anger was in hiding, like a monster that rips at its victim and then slinks back into its den. Without that familiar beast controlling her, Kathleen was bewildered. Without the anger to lean on, she was like a lost child, or like a one-legged woman who can't find her crutch. She searched, tried to bring back the phantom, but Omar's eyes threw her out of focus. She couldn't hold on. She was slipping.

On impulse, hardly aware of what she was doing, she reached up from her chair and slipped her arms around Omar's neck. Her heart

was filled with pain. She didn't want to come apart, let this stranger in. But she had to let go. It couldn't be stopped. Her soul's anguish poured freely. It reminded her of the night on the rectory steps, but this was different. She felt like she might actually be washed clean of something old and stale. It would take many years and many tears, but her heart somehow knew tonight could be the beginning, and she sobbed.

"There, there, now," Omar whispered as he lifted her to her feet. He took her in his arms and gently rubbed her back. He held her close. She felt the warmth of his body flowing into her, and it made her feel secure. Her sobs softened.

I think I could trust this man. The thought surprised her.

Kathleen whispered through her tears, "In my back, between my shoulders, there's a great black hole. Sometimes it feels like I'll fall in it and disappear."

"Here?" he asked, placing his hand on her back at the level of her heart.

"Yes," Kathleen murmured softly. She turned her face to his neck while he continued the gentle massage. His body scent reminded her of fine new leather.

"Better?" His voice vibrated deep and soft against Kathleen's breast.

She felt his lips brush her cheek.

A delicious shiver flooded her body. A desire she hardly knew could exist coursed through her. In his eyes, she saw passion and knew he saw the same in hers. Their first kiss was tentative. Their lips touched again, a bit more surely. Kathleen hungered. The instinct of ages inspired her as she searched his open mouth with her kiss. She drew him in. Their tongues danced in spirals.

Kathleen's past nagged at her. She pushed it away, denied it, but it rose up again, strong from deep inside, a familiar phantom. She

was forced to stop. Kathleen's heart belonged to rage, and rage was a jealous lover.

She gasped, "We'd better stop. They might come in."

Omar looked deep into Kathleen's eyes. What he saw puzzled him. It didn't seem to be fear the Mulcahys might walk in on them.

"What is it, Kathleen? What's wrong?"

Kathleen felt an urge to open up, share her terrible secret. She decided to take the risk. She sat on the loveseat and he sat beside her. Kathleen took one of Omar's big hands in hers.

"My family . . . my parents and brother . . . were burned to death. A bomb was thrown through our window because my brother was IRA."

Kathleen's words struck Omar in the heart. His eyes went wide. His breath all but gone, he muttered, "Good God!"

He thought: *Both our families were murdered!* The shock of that kismet showed on his face.

Kathleen saw in Omar's response something more intense, more personal than she expected.

"What?" she asked.

Omar shook his head. He didn't want to turn the conversation away from whatever Kathleen needed to say; about his own hell, he would tell her another time.

"When did it happen?" he asked when he got his breath.

"Four years ago." She explained about Tim and his plan to attack a British outpost, and about how the firebomb was thrown through their window and her entire family killed.

"Ever since then, I've sworn to fight the bloody bastards and they know it. I've taken an oath of vengeance. It fills me." She turned her face away and whispered, "That's why I can't. . . ."

Omar took her face between his hands and searched her troubled eyes.

Kathleen felt his tenderness, his concern, and she turned her head from him as tears started slipping down her cheeks. With strong but gentle hands he brought her eyes back to his. "Please. Stay."

Kathleen's demon was still in control, but she felt a new excitement, too.

"Omar," she whispered. Her heart pounded. She felt dizzy, overwhelmed, flying too fast. "Not now, Omar. Not yet. I'm sorry."

Omar smiled and put his hands on her shoulders. In her eyes he saw a conflicted woman of great depth, a woman of passion.

"Let's sit together and talk. Okay?" he said.

Kathleen smiled as she nodded, sniffing once.

"Here. Blow," Omar said gently as he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He got up to stoke the fire.

Kathleen watched his muscular arms work the fire tongs as he rearranged the logs in the hearth. *Your arms felt safe. Do I dare get to know you?*

As Omar put the tongs back in place, a log spit a large spark at him. It landed on the front of his pullover and the garment began to smolder and smoke. Suddenly a patch of flame licked up toward Omar's face. He grabbed at the bottom corners to yank it off over his head. As he spun away from the fireplace, his hands pulling the flaming sweater off, Kathleen said, "*Jayzus, Mary and Joseph!*" Reacting on reflex, she flung her cup of tea at the flame.

Her aim was poor. The tea, now only lukewarm, hit Omar square in the face.

The pullover was off but still in flames, and Omar flung it into the fireplace.

"You okay, then?" she asked as she jumped to her feet.

"Yes. I didn't get burned."

Kathleen pointed at his face. She laughed, yielding to fatigue and the stress of the moment.

“What?” he asked with a grin, as she continued to laugh and point.

He felt around his face and finally found it. A tea bag hung from his right ear. He pulled it off, grinned, tossed it into the fireplace, and the two turned to the loveseat. Kathleen’s laughter had awakened a thirst in him that he had denied most of his adult life.

“I’d like very much to be your cup of tea,” he joked softly, “but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

Kathleen was still giggling. She said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed. I suppose it’s because I’m so tired.”

Omar grinned. “I guess I did look pretty funny. I usually wear my tea bag over my *left* ear.” He reached for a napkin to wipe his face.

Kathleen giggled again and said. “In Tahiti, you know, a flower on the right ear means a girl is available.”

“Well, if that applies to men wearing tea bags, we must be in Tahiti.”

“No,” Kathleen said. “If this is *Tuesday* we must be in Tahiti.”

Omar’s face grew serious as he heard his mind whisper, *And if my heart is telling the truth, I must be falling for you.* The thought surprised him. Could he be falling for this woman? Falling was not in his experience. Taking, yes, but not falling.

“Are you really okay? Did you get burned? Do you need some ointment?”

“No. I’m fine. It was good to hear you laugh.” They looked into each other’s eyes for a long silent moment. The attraction was strong. “Feeling better?” he asked.

Kathleen nodded and smiled. She was feeling better than she had

in a long time. They sat on the love seat and settled into one another's arms. The flames dwindled to embers and conversation ebbed.

As dawn approached she fell asleep, her head on Omar's shoulder and a childlike smile on her face. Omar saw the child, but in her smile he also saw the woman.

