

## PROLOGUE

Afterwards nobody could remember why they had decided to go for a walk at that ungodly hour of the morning. Had it been Oran's idea? He had drunk far less than anyone else. It would be just like him to drag them out of their beds when they were still in an alcoholic stupor. The three eventually agreed that, yes, the walk was definitely Oran's suggestion. They sat in silence, each replaying the day's events. At last, one of the girls said, 'But why would she say that? Why would she even think such a thing? It doesn't make any sense.'

Her friend shrugged.

'The world is full of nutters. It doesn't matter what she said. We know the truth. None of us are murderers.'

## ONE

It was four weeks into the new school term, but Amy had already adjusted to her new routine. She threw her arms around Aoife, then ran off to join her friends without a backward glance. Aoife waved at the teacher, said hi to two of the other mothers and hurried back to her car. Her phone rang as she was opening the door.

'Hi, Orla, I don't have much time. I'm on my way to work. Is everything okay?'

'Sure. I need to ask a favour, but there's no rush.'

Aoife checked her watch. 'I have a few minutes. What's up?'

'Remember I told you I was about to get my first case?'

'You got it? Brilliant. Is it something exciting?'

'Yes and no. Do you remember the young guy accused of pushing his friend off the Cliffs of Moher?'

'Vaguely. I thought the police decided not to press charges.'

'They did, but you must have seen all the interviews Nancy Duggan's given in the last two weeks. Mind you, my firm's going to put a stop to that any day now.'

'She's the witness, right?'

'She's not a witness, Aoife. She's a lunatic who is so desperate for attention that she's claiming my client is a murderer.'

'My client"! Oh, Orla, that sounds so good.'

'It does, rather, doesn't it? But I'm only the junior in the case, and at the moment I'm well on

my way to getting a reputation for complete incompetence. I'm getting nowhere with this thing.'

Aoife leant against the car. 'What are you trying to do?'

'Ideally if I could get that Duggan woman to announce on national TV that she made the whole story up, that would really make me the new hotshot in the firm. But as that's not likely, I thought I'd take advantage of having a friend who's a brilliant reporter—'

'Hardly brilliant, and I'm not even a full-time reporter.'

'Full-time, part-time, it doesn't matter to the Duggan woman. She'd talk to anyone she could convince my client is guilty.'

'So, this young guy is your client?'

'Oh, did I forget to mention that? Ben, yes, he's my client. Well, he's my firm's client.'

'I don't understand why he needs a lawyer when no charges have been brought against him.'

'He's taking a libel case against the Duggan woman. That's why I said it's kind of exciting. A murder case would be better, but they'd never let a junior have any part of that.'

'Isn't a libel case a bit of a risk? And surely it would cost a fortune.'

'His father is Edward Weston.'

'The guy who owns the fast-food chain?'

'Amongst other things. Money won't be an issue.'

'So how can I help?'

'The Duggan woman isn't going to talk to anybody in this firm, and the reporters she's been speaking to are only interested in a good story. I need somebody who will try to find out the truth.'

'If she's making the whole thing up, she's hardly likely to tell me, is she?'

'No, but you're good at getting to the bottom of things and you might get some idea of how her mind works. It's a lot more than I have to go on at the moment.'

'Okay, I'll do it. Jason has Amy this weekend. I'll drive down to Clare first thing on Saturday morning.'

'The Duggans have a weekend house in Clare. During the week they live in Stepside.'

'That's definitely a lot handier.' Aoife checked her watch again. 'I've got to go, Orla. Text me her contact details and I'll phone you when I have an interview set up.'

## TWO

In her ten-minute absence, the car had turned into a furnace. Could this really be Ireland? In October? Aoife switched the air conditioning to full and took the motorway to Naas. Twenty minutes later, she reached the small industrial estate. Murphy Building Supplies was the first turn to the right. Aoife pulled into the small car park opposite the entrance and parked beside Tony Murphy's Volvo. She sighed. Three weeks into the job and she already dreaded going to work each morning. At least she only worked two days a week. She didn't think she could cope full time.

A red Toyota pulled up beside her, radio blaring. A woman in her mid-thirties rolled down the window and shouted over the music. 'Aoife?'

'Yes.' Aoife smiled. 'Cathy?'

'That's me. Can you believe this weather? It doesn't seem right being stuck in an office for eight hours. We should all be sunning ourselves on a beach somewhere.'

'The weather forecast says it will last until next week.'

'I hope it's right.' Cathy patted lanky brown hair that looked like it hadn't seen a hairbrush in days and peered at Aoife through bleary eyes. 'I need a few minutes to get myself together. I'll see you inside.'

#

Murphy Building Supplies was a four-man operation—Tony Murphy, the owner, George, the warehouseman, Cathy, who did most of the day-to-day work, and now Aoife. They had a few thousand clients, some of whom called into the office to make

their purchases. By keeping overheads low, they made a reasonable profit, none of which was spent on office facilities. In other organisations Aoife had worked where cash was handled on the premises, the day's takings had been handed into accounts each evening, and by mid-morning a security van had arrived to take it to the bank. Here, Aoife was expected to count and bag the money each day, a task she dreaded. She had made it clear at the interview that she would never do the bank run. Getting mugged was not part of her job description. Aoife had just finished bagging the money and putting it into the safe when Cathy sauntered into the building. Her hair was now pulled into a high ponytail, and skilfully applied makeup made her appear awake and alert. Aoife reached across her desk, drew back the hatch and smiled.

'Hi, Cathy, nice to meet you at last.'

'Oh my God! This is where they put you? What was Tony thinking? He said he was going to build you an office.'

Aoife waved a hand encompassing her desk, computer, printer, phone and the company safe. 'My office.'

'That's not an office, it's a glass box. Actually, it's worse than a glass box.' Cathy pointed at the security monitor on the corner of Aoife's desk. 'Doesn't it freak you out seeing every move you make on that thing?'

'It did until I discovered I don't have to display all the screens. I've hidden the one that shows me.'

'That won't stop other people from watching it. You're like an animal in a zoo, for God's sake. And you can be quite sure...' She put a hand to her

temple. 'It's way too early for this. I need a coffee. Would you like one?'

Aoife pointed at the mug on her desk. 'I'm okay, thanks.'

#

As Cathy disappeared into the kitchen, Aoife's phone rang.

'Good morning, Tony.'

'Morning, Aoife. Could you come upstairs, please.'

Aoife sighed and picked up her notebook. "You need this job, you need this job," she muttered to herself as she trudged up the concrete stairs to the partially converted attic space.

The attic area was divided into two sections—a room crammed to the brim with Murphy Building Supplies' entire product line which passed as a stockroom and Tony Murphy's office.

The office was an impressive size, but either Tony considered windows to be an unnecessary luxury or they had run out of money mid-conversion. Aoife's nose twitched at the stale smell. It was beyond her how Tony could spend five days a week in a room without natural light or ventilation. It must be dreadful in any weather, but in this heatwave she couldn't see how anybody could bear it for longer than ten minutes. Aoife pasted a smile on her face and knocked on the door.

Tony Murphy stood as she entered. As he pushed his chair back to make room for his bulky frame, his head was level with the floor fan. The few remaining hairs on top of his egg-shaped head didn't even budge.

'Good morning, Aoife.' He beamed as he looked her up and down. 'That dress really suits

you. It brings out the blue in your eyes. You should wear blue more often.'

'Morning, Tony. Cathy's here.'

'Yes, I know.' His eyes flicked to the security monitor at the corner of his desk. It was divided into five sections covering the small office that served as a shop, the car park, the main door, the general reception area and her glass box.

'There isn't much Cathy doesn't know about this place, so if you have any questions, she's the one to go to. Now, I want to show you our new premises.' He gestured at the plans on his desk and Aoife moved closer to get a good look.

'It's going to be twice the size of this building. We'll be able to have a proper warehouse'—he gestured to the room across the corridor—'not a converted office like we have now. There will be no more asking customers to come back next week. Everything they could possibly want will be under one roof.'

'That's great.'

'Great? It's fantastic. Have a proper look, Aoife. See how close we are to the motorway?' He pointed at a circle on the map.

Aoife nodded and tried to look impressed. When Tony pointed out the large car park, she took another step forward. Tony's arm snaked around her waist. Aoife dropped her notebook. As she bent down to pick it up, she took two steps backwards.

Tony folded up the plans. 'That's all for now, Aoife. I wanted you to see you made a good decision coming to work for us. Murphy Building Supplies is going places and we want every one of our employees to benefit from our success.'

Aoife nodded again.

'You'll see we're all one big happy family. It's one for all and all for one here. As they say, there's no "I" in team.'

It took a huge effort for Aoife not to roll her eyes. She stretched her lips into a smile, muttered vague congratulations and hurried back to her box.

#

It was lunchtime before she saw Cathy again.

'I'm going to get something to eat, Aoife. Would you like to join me?'

Aoife had brought in a packed lunch, but she stuffed it in her bag and they walked to the Centra at the end of the road. After ten minutes of the sun beating down on their backs, Aoife's dress was sticking to her and her armpits felt moist. The blast of cold air that hit her as she opened the shop door made her smile with relief. They queued for sandwiches, got cups of boiling water for their tea bags and sat at one of the small tables in the corner.

'I'm exhausted.' Cathy rubbed her eyes and yawned.

'Did you enjoy your holiday?'

'Holiday!' Cathy grabbed the mug she had almost sent flying. 'Tony told you I was on holidays?'

'He said you'd taken some time off. I assumed you were on holiday.'

'If only! No, my mother had a stroke and she needed full-time care until I could find a nursing home that would take her. I've spent what feels like forever ringing every nursing home in the country at least once each day. A place in Meath took her last night.'

'You were lucky. I've heard there are huge waiting lists for those places.'

'I know. Some people have to wait years for a bed. It's such a relief to have mum sorted, but the commute will be a killer. I left her at midnight and it was one a.m. before I got home. I don't even want to think what it will be like in rush-hour traffic.' Cathy dipped the tea bag in the cup of hot water, fished it out and placed it on the edge of her saucer. 'I swear, family are absolutely exhausting.'

'I'm sorry. That sounds terrible.'

'I suppose it was inevitable this would happen. Mum was almost fifty when I was born, so I'm lucky she made it this far before becoming seriously ill.' She slipped one foot out of her sandal and crossed her legs, one bare foot dangling in the air. 'I suppose your parents are still quite young.'

'They died when I was eighteen.'

'Oh! I'm sorry.'

'It's okay. It was a long time ago. If there's anything I can do to help, Cathy, please let me know.'

Cathy gave her a weary smile. 'Thanks. Things are a bit rough at the moment, but hopefully I'll be able to get back into some kind of routine now.'

'Do you have any family who can help?'

'There's just me and my sister. She's fifteen years older than me and has a family of her own, so I barely know her. My father had a midlife crisis soon after I was born, took up with a woman half his age and they emigrated to the US. It's been Mum and me most of my life. We're very close.' She blinked back tears. 'Enough about me. What do you think of Murphy's?'

'I'm still getting the hang of things. I can't believe that computer system. It's like something out of the dark ages.'

'Tell me about it! I've tried to convince Tony we need a new one, but he won't hear of it. Mum said it was a complete nightmare when they introduced the first computer system in the eighties. It took months to get it to work properly and they lost several clients. Tony swore he'd never allow a new computer inside the door again.'

'Your mother said that?'

'Tony didn't mention it? Mum had this job before me. When she retired, I was just starting my accountancy exams. Mum suggested it would be a good place to get some experience.' Cathy shrugged. 'Twelve years later and I'm still here.'

'You must really enjoy the job.'

Cathy laughed. 'I wouldn't say that. At first I didn't have the experience to work anywhere else, then before I realised it had happened, I'd been here so long nobody else would hire me.'

'Oh!'

'It's not that bad. Tony pays me well. I don't have anything to complain about and I'd probably miss the place if I ever left. Murphy's is like a second home to me.' She took a sip of her tea, grimaced and pushed the mug to one side. 'My earliest memories are playing in the warehouse. Until I was fourteen, I came here every evening after school and did my homework while I waited for Mum to finish work.' She opened her mouth to say something and closed it again.

Aoife waited.

Cathy's eyes fastened on Aoife's engagement ring. 'Aoife, this is a little delicate...' She folded her

hands, glanced at Aoife's engagement ring again and said, 'The thing is...'

'Yes?'

'Tony's known me so long he thinks of me almost as a member of his family. But, well, you're not our first temp. I know what Tony can be like. Usually I insist on having the final say in any temps we hire and, no offence, but I would never have employed a good-looking woman in her twenties. It's asking for trouble. You know what I mean?'

'I do.'

'I thought you might. Tony's old-school. To him it's a bit of harmless fun and a way of showing affection. Mum's told me stories about his father, and believe me, the apple didn't fall far from the tree.' Cathy sighed. 'I suppose I should be glad the old fool didn't take advantage of my absence to hire a silly teenager. You're a sensible young woman, Aoife. I know you can handle the situation.' She picked up her sandwich. 'Tony tells me you have a daughter.'

'Yes, Amy. She's four.'

'Do you have a picture?'

Aoife flicked through her phone and handed it to Cathy.

'Oh, she's so beautiful. All that dark hair and her eyes are so blue! Is that your husband?'

'No, Amy's father and I are in the process of divorcing. That's Conor, my fiancé.'

'Do you find it difficult being a single parent?'

'I have a lot of help. Her grandmother lives nearby. Maura would take Amy every day if I let her.'

'I can see why you want to work part-time. I imagine it must be quite difficult to get local part-time jobs.'

'It is.'

'Well, you're here now and Murphy's are good employers. I'm sure it's been difficult for you the last few weeks with nobody to talk to about Tony's peculiarities. You hear such terrible stories about the things women have to put up with in the workplace. Anybody would be worried.' She touched Aoife's arm. 'That's why I appreciate you giving me this opportunity to put your mind at ease. Aoife, I've known Tony my entire life and I promise there's absolutely nothing to worry about. His hands might stray a bit, but he won't try to take it any further. He never does.'