

EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

By Rosemary Jenkinson

CHAPTER ONE

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The taxi's hurtling into the inner-city east past slogans, cenotaphs and Titanic murals. David Donnan is too busy looking through to window to chat to the driver, but notices him switch on the radio in disappointment at the lack of craic to be had. They pass the launderette, All Washed Up, and the chippy, The Codfather, while on the opposite side of the Newtownards Road the comedy is a little more sophisticated with The Hedonist hair salon. Typical Belfast, always trying to be uber-witty and failing, thinks David, rolling his eyes. From his seat, he can see The Gold Shop, The Baby Shop, the lawyers specializing in asylum, and The Union Jack Flag Shop bearing the signage 'British By Birthright', just to drive home its political message, as if it were needed. In fact, there are more Union Jacks flying on the road than in the flag shop; a vexillologist's wet dream.

'See that?' says the taxi driver as they approach a wall with fresh white lettering. 'It's the Taoiseach's address.'

An address has been daubed in white paint opposite the Skainos Centre. It's a means of threatening the Irish premier without spelling out his fate.

'Is that really where he lives?'

'Oh, it's real alright. Load a couple of machine guns in your boot, stick that address in your satnav and you'll be there in a couple of hours,' the taxi driver chuckles.

'Turbulent times,' comments David ironically.

Another pulse of rain is heading over the tawny mountains. It's one of those windy spring days with constant crests of sunshine and showers. The Union Jacks from the previous summer are undulating on the lamp posts, looking faded, the colours all bled out, but beneath them are new placards proclaiming 'Vote for the Union'. There are just two weeks to go until the referendum on Irish unity. A few of the flags are knotted around the lamp posts like winter scarves tied tight around a neck. A district strangulated by its own identity, thinks David. Some shards of smashed-up CCTV camera are lying by the kerb.

He can't avoid a twinge of guilt when the taxi crawls past a bus shelter, past a becoated family jiggling their damp legs to keep warm. He normally takes the bus to do his bit to

reduce global warming, but he has the digital voice recorder in his pocket and needs to get back to Queen's. It was such a great interview. He almost squeezes himself with delight to think of the quotes he extracted with his cunning combo of charm and razor-sharp questions. It's a matter of instinct - luring, lulling and leading. My God, I really should have been an interrogator, MI5 would have loved me, he vaunts to himself, then recalls with a touch of resentment that as a Northern Irishman, MI5 wouldn't have touched him with a bargepole.

He's still surprised that Kyle McC Carson agreed to be interviewed. Kyle was one of those invisibles in the Troubles, the deadliest type who never spoke a word of his deeds while carrying them out to the letter. A true footsoldier and it was fascinating how he'd had no nerves when he'd killed, but later went to pieces with worry about his own soldiers. A classic doer, not a planner, with no regrets over his multiple murders. The upbeat picture of mental health; you'd never have a notion of the darkness behind his clear blue eyes.

The taxi grinds to a halt, bumping David out of his thoughts. A long line of traffic stretches out in front.

'Looks like an accident on the Westlink,' posits the taxi driver, eyeing him from the mirror.

'Can you cut through the side streets? I've a lecture at two.'

The lecture's a white lie. It's at three, not two, but he wants to get the interview secured on his system. Kyle McC Carson put him over it time and time again that the recording mustn't be released before he dies. Kyle also made him sweat over the signing of the release form, insisting on reading every word, excruciatingly letting the pen hover before committing nib to page.

But, Christ, he has so much to do today. Why did he ever agree to take part in that *University Challenge* gig tonight? Emmet O'Hanlon, his Head of Faculty, emailed him two weeks ago to advise brushing up on Shakespeare in preparation, but, frankly, he hasn't bothered his arse. Too busy approaching former paramilitaries, preserving history, important things of that ilk, though, of course, he has to impress Emmet too.

He's vaguely aware of leaving the little shipyard streets and shuttling towards the Embankment. The Lagan is muddy from the rain and he chuckles to himself, thinking it looks like a watery version of Willy Wonka's chocolate river. He's starving, but he hasn't had time to eat today, nor will. Will. Will Shakespeare wrote thirty-nine plays. How's he going to swot up on that before tonight? He opens Google on his phone and scours through the dramatis personae of Shakespeare's plays. Half the names mean nothing to him. Kate, his ex-wife, studied English at uni – she could have helped him with a rundown, a compendium, if only she'd talk to him these days. If there are no questions about *Macbeth* or the history plays he's screwed. All his students are going to adore seeing him publicly shamed, especially as he hasn't spared his tongue on their ignorance. Sometimes he knows he's overcritical and regrets it, but critical thinking forms the whole basis of his intellect.

His mind leaps from Lady Macbeth's 'Out, damn spot' to a memory of working in a beetroot factory as a student. In spite of his thick rubber gloves, the red of the beetroot still bled through to his hands. He can't help smiling to himself. He's come a long way since then. Emmet has informed him a new professor's post is to be advertised in the next couple of months. He's been working towards such a position for years. His coevals are probably going for it too, but the professorship feels finally within his grasp.

The taxi's turning into Chlorine Gardens, ferrying him into the leafy suburbs, though, in fact, they're not technically leafy as it's only April. Stop being so pedantic, he tells himself. The habit of constantly correcting his students is seeping into own speech, but all this self-editing is making him hesitant. How can you be an academic without being fluent and verbose?

As soon as the taxi pulls into University Square, the sun splits through the cloud in a daffodil yellow. He tells the driver to put the fare on the departmental account, pulling a few coins out of his pocket for a tip. It pays to be kind, he tells himself, metaphorically patting himself on the back.

'Bye now,' he says, but the moment he's out of the car he checks his pockets and realizes he doesn't have the digital recorder. Fuck!

'Wait!' he shouts, as the taxi pulls away, and he runs after it down the street, waving his arms.

Luckily, the driver spots him in the mirror and bumps to a quick stop. David races up and opens the door.

‘Sorry, I’ve lost my...,’ he explains, but there it is, lying in the footwell. ‘That was a close one,’ he says to the driver, the nerves scuttering along his back, thinking of what would happen if the recorder fell into the wrong hands and berating himself. Still, it’s easy to be distracted when he has so much on his mind.

He runs up the steps through the columned door into the History and Politics Department.

‘Doctor Donnan!’ some young lecturer calls out.

‘Sorry, can’t stop,’ he says without making eye contact, but he can see in his periphery the long blond hair of that American post-doc, Angelina Murphy. They’re always busting his balls for something, these wannabe Irish Americans, too keen by half, all democrats worshipping Clinton, Obama and especially George Mitchell who they think solved the Troubles, despite his alleged hook-up with an Epstein sex-slave. Sanctimonious bastards, the lot of them.

He bursts into his office, but doesn’t have time to back up McCarson’s interview, so he sets the recorder on his cluttered desk and checks his emails. Uh-oh, what fresh hell is this? An email from Emmet, telling him *University Challenge* is going to be filmed live tonight. That’s all he needs, for his ignorance to be immortalized on YouTube, eternally pixelated. Why does everything in the world have to be recorded? He hasn’t time for this. Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Voltmand (who the hell?), Horatio, Ophelia...Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them.

Time, time, time. His lecture is in fifteen minutes. He feverishly leafs through the papers on his desk. Aha, got it! ‘The Northern Ireland Protocol and the Alienation of Loyalists’. He flings it into his briefcase and decides to run into Costa Coffee on the way or, as he calls it, Costa Fortune as they’d fleece you blind. God, he needs to calm down. There’s a sweaty smell like a rotting potato field emanating from his left armpit. He plucks at his damp shirt and lets the air at it – it’ll soon dry out in the April breeze. Be cool, calm, secure, he commands himself, striding out of his office.

Just in time, he catches himself and rushes back to his desk. He picks up his digital recorder, opens his drawer and sets it inside, turning the key in the lock. Better safe than sorry. He should have made a backup on his phone as the recorder's memory is starting to fail. It's patently ridiculous how people are expected to live longer and longer, while technology is built to last less than ever. Capitalism at its finest.

In the corridor, Kyle's words keep coming back to him, all the predictions about a loyalist attack in the run up to the Border Poll.

'Something big will happen on the 24th of April. You mark my words. History will prove it.'

'Why wait till the day of the referendum when people will have made up their minds how to vote?' David had asked. 'Why not before?'

Kyle had smiled. 'Pure impact. Everyone will change their mind when they see what violence can be unleashed.'

It makes him uncomfortable to think he had liked Kyle. Kyle was welcoming, affable and gave an impression of openness in spite of withholding certain stories. It has always struck David that the people who have the lightest attitude to life are the darkest.