

THE DOUBLE TAP

She was the richest little girl in the world. Rich beyond the dreams of avarice, rich almost beyond comprehension. As she played in the surf, giggling and shrieking and running from the waves, the white-jacketed waiter slowly polished a crystal tumbler and tried to imagine what it must be like to have so much money. The interest on the interest was still more than he'd earn in a lifetime. In a thousand lifetimes, maybe. He polished the crystal diligently and when he held it up in the Mediterranean sunlight it sparkled like a diamond. He was wearing white cotton gloves so that his fingers wouldn't mark the pristine surface. He placed it on a solid silver tray and reached for another tumbler.

The little girl knelt down by the water's edge and picked up something, a sand crab perhaps, or a pretty shell, and she skipped across the beach to her guardians who sat together under a huge umbrella. The man was her grandfather, wealthy in his own right but nowhere near as rich as the little girl. The woman was her great aunt, a withered husk of a human being, wrapped in a black shawl despite the searing heat. The little girl showed them what she'd found and they smiled benevolently. That they loved and cherished her was beyond doubt. Even from his post a hundred feet from the umbrella, the waiter could see it in their eyes. The old man ruffled the girl's wet hair and her laughter tinkled like a glass windchime. The old woman smiled a toothless smile and said something in Greek.

"No, Auntie," admonished the little girl. "English today. Today we must speak English." The waiter held up the second tumbler and inspected it. The little girl was learning English, Spanish and Russian in addition to her own language. She was only eight years old, but already she was being groomed for the life that lay ahead of her. A life of wealth and power, a life that few other people in the world would believe existed. What could it be like to have so much, the waiter mused? And yet, thought the waiter, she was also to be pitied because the immense wealth had come at a heavy price. She was an orphan: her mother and father had died in a power boat accident the previous year. Now, as she laughed and played, she had only the company of her aged guardians and the men in dark glasses.

There were three bodyguards, big men, wide shouldered and well-muscled, standing close to the umbrella, their heads constantly moving even though there wasn't a stranger within half a mile. It was a private beach, on a private island, one of the dozen or so homes around the world owned by her trust fund, but the bodyguards never let their concentration slip. They wore shorts and brightly coloured shirts and had white smears of sunscreen down their noses, but no one would ever mistake them for holidaymakers. Occasionally the sea breeze would lift their loose shirts to reveal a holstered handgun or a sub-machine pistol. In addition to the three bodyguards on the beach, there were another two in the house and ten more sleeping or relaxing in the barracks next to the swimming pool. The little girl was under guard for every minute of every day; even as she slept two men would stand outside her bedroom door and another two under her window. She was the richest little girl in the world and she was the most protected.

The waiter slid the tumbler onto the tray and covered it with a crisp white cloth so that the crystal wouldn't be desecrated by windblown sand. He was sweating and he had to resist the urge to wipe his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. He kept a wary eye on the old man. It was almost noon and he would soon be wanting his first glass of ouzo of the day.

The little girl ran back to the sea, hopping across the hot sand until she reached the cooler fringes of the water's edge. She squatted down and splayed her hands, palms uppermost, releasing the crustacean she'd so proudly shown the old couple. It was a small crab and it scuttled sideways, seeking sanctuary in the wet sand. Within seconds it had burrowed to safety and the little girl waved goodbye.

Far out to sea, a powerful speedboat ploughed through the waves. One of the bodyguards put a pair of binoculars to his eyes and studied it for several minutes. He spoke to the other men in Yiddish. They were Israelis, as were all the child's protectors. It had nothing to do with religion, the waiter knew, it was simply that Israeli-trained bodyguards were the best in the world. If necessary they would die to protect their charge.

The old man looked towards the waiter and nodded. The waiter took the ice bucket and the bottle of ouzo out of the gas-powered refrigerator and placed them on the tray. He held it with both gloved hands as we walked gingerly across the burning sand, hot even through his leather-soled shoes. As soon as he stepped out of the shade of the massive umbrella above the bar he felt the sun beat down on his hair and a rivulet of sweat ran down his neck. The three bodyguards were now all standing fifty feet or so behind the little girl, looking over her head at the speedboat which was arcing through the waves, away from the beach. There was more Yiddish, and shrugs.

The ice cubes rattled wetly in the ice bucket and the waiter took extra care where he put his feet on the shifting sand. The old man had bent his head close to the old woman, listening intently. She was probably warning him about drinking too much, the waiter thought, and he smiled to himself. The bodyguards were to the waiter's side, still staring out to sea. He took his right hand off the tray and dropped the ice bucket lid onto the sand before grabbing for the silenced automatic. The metal had been chilled by the ice and he was aware of how pleasant it felt through the cotton gloves as he levelled the gun between the shoulder-blades of the nearest bodyguard. The gun made no more sound than a child's cough and the third bodyguard had only begun to turn when the waiter put two of the mercury-tipped slugs into his back. Out of the corner of his eye the waiter saw the old couple struggling to their feet but he knew there was nothing they could do. They were too old, too feeble, to do anything but watch.

The waiter stepped over the legs of one of the dead bodyguards, the gun now warm to the touch. The child was kneeling in the sand, trying to find the crab. She looked up at him as he approached, smiling because there were only friends on the island, friends and protectors. She frowned when she saw the gun in his hand. The waiter smiled down at her. "Are you frightened?" he asked softly.

She looked up at him and smiled again, hopefully. "No," she said, "I'm not."

The waiter nodded and shot her in the head, then in the chest. Behind him he heard a mournful wail, more of a howl than a scream. He couldn't tell if it was the old man or the woman. In the distance, the speedboat headed in the direction of the shore, its twin engines roaring. The waiter ran towards it as the blood of the richest little girl in the world soaked into the sand.

Mike Cramer wiped the condensation from the window of the taxi and peered out. The rain had stopped, though the taxi's windscreen wipers continued to swish back and forth. "You can drop me here," he said to the driver, a sullen rock of a man who hadn't spoken a word all the way from the ferry terminal.

"Suit yourself," said the driver, jamming on the brakes. Cramer couldn't remember having said anything that might offend the man. Maybe he'd just heard some bad news. Cramer thrust a twenty pound note into the man's hands and told him to keep the change, taking some small pleasure from the fact that for the first time the driver's face cracked into a smile. "You're sure now?" queried the driver, as if the large tip had provoked a change of heart. "The place you're wanting is further up the hill, it's no trouble."

"I want to walk," said Cramer, opening the door and shouldering his duffel bag. He trudged up the hill, the wind at his back. He didn't quite understand himself why he was walking and not driving up to the door. It was symbolic somehow, but he wouldn't be able to explain the symbolism to anyone. It was something to do with arriving on his own two feet, walking like a man and not being driven like an invalid, but even that felt too simplistic. He slipped his hand into the pocket of the reefer jacket and felt the two brass keys. One for the front door, the solicitor had said, and one for the kitchen door. The kitchen door was also bolted from the inside, so he'd have to go in the front way.

He rested the bag on the pavement and turned to look out over the harbour. To the left bobbed the fishing boats of Howth, sturdy working boats, huddled together as if sheltering from the bitter cold wind but more than capable of taking the worst that the Irish Sea could

throw at them. To the right, the weekend boats of the yacht club, their steel lines singing in the wind, their pristine white hulls rocking gently in the swell, tethered neatly in rows along the wooden pontoons of the marina like soldiers on parade. The yacht club building was a creamy yellow colour, its modern lines at odds with the weathered fishing village. Behind the club was a car park, but only two vehicles were parked there and one was a delivery truck. Fair-weather sailors, thought Cramer, and today wasn't fair weather. He swung the duffel bag back up on his shoulder and grunted. High above his head, seagulls swooped and banked, screaming for attention. Cramer craned his neck back and stared up at them. They reminded him of vultures, gathering over a dying animal. Cramer smiled at the image despite himself.

The cottage was close to the brow of the hill, a hundred feet or more from its nearest neighbour. It was small and squat, a granite pillbox with tiny windows and a steeply sloping roof, built to withstand the raging sea and the storms that blew in from the north-east. It was a hardy home, a home that had outlasted the men who'd built it and that would be around for generations to come. The curtains were drawn and the windows were grimy. The cottage had been empty for more than six months, the solicitor had said. The property market was in a slump and the house was too small for most people. That was why he'd been able to buy it so cheaply. There was another reason, Cramer knew. Few people wanted to move into a house where someone had died. Cramer didn't care either way.

He dropped the duffel bag onto the stone step and put the key in the rusting lock. The key grated, and for a moment he thought that it would refuse to turn, but then it clicked and he pushed the battered oak door open. He stepped across the threshold, dragging the canvas bag after him. The door opened into the living room, a large brick fireplace to his left, a cramped staircase to the right. An overstuffed armchair sat next to the fire. Cramer noticed that the leather was all scuffed on the arms and there was a dark, greasy patch on the back of the chair where the previous occupant had sat for hours, staring into the flames. He closed the door behind him. The air was stale and damp so he threw open the single window and allowed the cold salty sea breeze to blow in. Tattered curtains, long faded and thin in places, flapped in the draught like trapped birds. There were ashes in the grate, and on the floor by the chair was an earthenware ashtray containing a single cigarette, stubbed out and broken in half. Next to it stood a tea-stained mug, chipped and cracked. Cramer felt like a detective at a crime scene, though there had been no doubt what had killed the old man who used to live in the house: a massive heart attack in his sleep, brought on by too much whisky and fried food and not enough exercise, coupled with the fact that he'd passed his allotted three score years and ten by a decade or more.

A chipboard door led through into a compact kitchen containing an ancient refrigerator, a dirt-encrusted gas stove and a Welsh dresser. Cramer opened the refrigerator door and the light came on. The solicitor had promised to reconnect the electricity supply and he'd been as good as his word. A packet of long-forgotten cheese sat at the back of the refrigerator, black inside its plastic wrapper, next to a half-used bottle of Heinz tomato ketchup lying on its side as if it had been hurriedly thrown in. Cramer closed the door. The stairs led up to a single bedroom, and Cramer could smell what was within before he pushed open the door. The room was barely twelve feet by ten, little more than a cell with a single bed and a wardrobe. The sheets and blankets had been thrown aside as if the occupant had leapt out of bed, but Cramer knew that the old man had been taken away by ambulancemen, because he'd been dead for a week before anyone knocked at his front door. The sheets were stained with stale urine and faeces and there was long-dried blood on the yellowing pillow. Cramer opened the window and took a deep breath of fresh air.

A door in the corner of the room opened into a tiny bathroom containing a tub so small that he'd have difficulty sitting in it never mind lying down, a washbasin and a toilet. The white plastic lid was down and Cramer flushed without opening it. The cheese had been enough of an unpleasant surprise.

He pulled the soiled sheets and pillowcase off the bed and took them downstairs. There was a cardboard box by the fridge containing old tins and several empty whisky bottles. Cramer dropped the sheets onto the rubbish then unlocked the kitchen door and threw the

box outside into a small walled yard. There was a rusting bicycle leaning against the wall, its saddle missing and its chain broken, a reminder of the days when the old man had been able to cycle around the village. Cramer closed the door. The air was fresher and he could breathe without fighting the urge to throw up, but now it was too cold to take off his jacket. There was coal in a brass scuttle and a newspaper on the windowsill, and he soon had a fire burning in the grate. He rubbed his hands and held them out, warming them in front of the flames as he sat in the old man's chair. "There's no place like home," he muttered to himself. Outside, the screams of the gulls grew louder and more insistent.

The Colonel put his elbows on his knees and leant forward over the chessboard, his forehead screwed into deep creases as he studied his options. The rook seemed the best bet. He sat up and reached for the piece, then stopped midway, his hand suspended above the board. No, the bishop. The bishop first, then the rook. He moved the bishop, pressing the piece down hard on the board so that it registered with the computer.

A tiny red light flickered on the side of the plastic board, letting him know that the computer was thinking. The Colonel had developed an intense dislike of the flashing light. He'd only had the chess-playing computer for two weeks, but it was without doubt the most able player he'd ever faced. At its highest setting it could defeat him seventy-five per cent of the time, and he was determined to keep on playing until he could consistently better it. The telephone warbled and he picked up the receiver, his eyes still on the board. He was beginning to have second thoughts. Maybe it would have been better to have moved the rook first and then attacked with his bishop. "Yes?" he said.

"Mike Cramer's surfaced," said a voice that the Colonel instantly recognised.

"Where?" He sat back in his chair.

"Ireland. We spotted him at Holyhead boarding the ferry to Dun Laoghaire."

"There's no doubt?"

The caller sniffed, once. "None at all."

"Where is he now?"

"Howth, north of Dublin. He's bought a cottage there."

"He's what?" The Colonel closed his eyes as if in pain. "What the hell is he up to?" he asked.

The question was rhetorical but the caller answered nonetheless. "We were hoping you'd be able to tell us."

Mike Cramer put on his reefer jacket and buttoned it up to the neck as he closed the front door behind him. He didn't bother locking it. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and walked down the road. An elderly woman was standing on a stepladder cleaning the windows of the neighbouring cottage and as he walked by Cramer wished her a good morning. He found a general store facing the west pier and he bought coffee, milk, sugar, and a newspaper, not because there was anything in it he wanted to read but because he'd need it to get the fire going. He wasn't hungry but nonetheless put eggs, bacon and a loaf of bread into the wire shopping basket before handing it to the young lad behind the counter. "Are you here on holiday?" asked the boy as he totalled up Cramer's purchases and put them into a blue plastic carrier bag.

"Nah, I'm living here," said Cramer, passing over a twenty pound note.

The boy frowned. "In Howth? Jesus, I'm doing all I can to move out. There's nothing for anyone here." He gave Cramer his change.

"It's got everything I want," said Cramer. "See you around." He walked along the sea front to a pub built of the same stone as his cottage. Three fishermen in bright orange waterproof jackets were drinking at the bar and they turned as one towards him as he

stepped inside. They looked like brothers, balding, broad shoulders, ruddy cheeks and hands gnarled from too much exposure to sea water and cold winds. Cramer nodded a greeting and went to the far end of the bar where he ordered a double Famous Grouse from the matronly barmaid. He downed the whisky in one go and smacked his lips appreciatively.

“Good?” asked the barmaid.

“Oh yes,” said Cramer.

“Another?”

“Definitely. And have one yourself. While you’re at it, I’d like to buy the guys over there a drink.”

The barmaid beamed and refilled his glass. “Are you celebrating or something?”

“Or something,” said Cramer. He raised the glass and toasted the fishermen.

* * *

The boy sat in front of the television set and watched the rocket soar through the sky. A flat emotionless voice was calling out numbers but the boy didn't know what they referred to. Nor did he care. He sat open-mouthed as the rocket and its three astronauts headed for the moon. Just like in the comics. The boy leaned back and put his hands on the floor as he stared at the screen. He tried to imagine what it must be like to be in a space capsule, drinking through a tube and going to the toilet in a space suit. The boy wanted to go to the toilet but he didn't want to miss one second of the launch. He pressed his legs together and blocked out the thoughts of his full bladder. He heard his name being called but he ignored it and shuffled closer to the screen until his feet were almost under the television set. Something fell away from the bottom of the rocket and for a moment he thought that something had gone wrong, but then he heard the clipped voice say that separation had been successful and he realised that everything was okay.

His mother shouted for him again and the boy leaned forward and turned up the volume. The rocket was a small dot in the sky with a thick white plume trailing behind it. The boy wondered at what point the rocket was actually in space and not in the sky, and if there was a line somewhere up there that separated the two.

There was a banging from his mother's bedroom, the sound of a walking stick being pounded against the threadbare carpet. The boy got slowly to his feet. The banging was repeated, more rapidly this time. The boy went into the hallway and looked up the stairs. His legs felt like lead. His mother called his name again and the boy put a hand on the banister. He put his foot on the first step. He wished with all his heart for his father, but he was at work and wouldn't be back for hours. From the sixth step he could see his parents' bedroom door, painted in the same pale green colour as the rest of the doors in the house. The boy had lived in the house all his life and he couldn't remember them ever being any other colour. He took the stairs one at a time, pausing between each step, his eyes fixed on the door. “Where are you?” his mother shouted, then he heard her cough.

“I'm coming,” he called and ran up the last few stairs. He gripped the doorknob and pushed open the door. His mother was on the bed on her hands and knees, her body wracked with hacking coughs. Her mousy brown hair was tangled and matted, her eyes were red and puffy and there were stains down the front of her blue flannel nightie. She looked up as he walked into the room and stood at the foot of the bed.

Tears welled in the boy's eyes. “What do you want, Mum?” he asked.

His mother sat back on her heels and wrapped her arms around her stomach. “I just want to get better,” she cried.

“Me too,” said the boy. “That's what I want too.”

She held out her arms and he climbed up onto the bed and clung to her. She smoothed the back of his head with her hands and made small shushing noises. “You've got to be strong,” she whispered. “I'm going to need your help.” The boy buried his face in the flannel nightie and its smell of sick.”

The man in the wheelchair stopped to examine a rack of brightly coloured ties, running the silk through his gloved fingers. A salesman in an immaculate dark blue suit raised an eyebrow but the man in the wheelchair shook his head. Just looking. He put his hands on the wheels and pushed the chair forward. The people who passed him studiously avoided eye contact, as if they were embarrassed by his disability.

He rolled slowly towards the suit section. His legs were wrapped in a thick blue wool blanket and he felt sweat trickle down his thighs. An elderly man was being measured by a young assistant while his much younger fur-coated and clearly bored wife watched. Two Japanese tourists were pulling suits off the racks, holding them up and talking animatedly. The man in the wheelchair smiled to himself. Compared with Tokyo, the prices in Harrods were probably a bargain. He never paid Harrods prices for clothes, never wore anything with a label that could be recognised.

The Arab swept into the menswear department, flanked by two Harrods executives and a trio of bodyguards. The bodyguards were thickset men in black suits and tinted sunglasses and had matching thick moustaches. Saddam Hussein lookalikes. Their eyes swept back and forth like searchlights, but the man in the wheelchair noted with some small satisfaction that they looked right through him. Cripples were always invisible. The Arab was dressed in full desert robes and looked like something out of *Lawrence of Arabia*, totally out of place among the racks of tailored suits. Behind the Arab walked three black-robed women, their faces covered except for their eyes. One was clearly the Arab's mother, she was short and squat and moved like a buoy bobbing in a rough sea. The other two were his wives. The man in the wheelchair propelled himself forward.

One of the wives was a Saudi princess, and by all accounts she was built like a Russian weightlifter. The other, his second wife, was a former *Playboy* centrefold from Utah who'd been about to embark on a movie career when she'd settled for the sheikh and his millions instead. In the black robes, it was impossible to tell the two wives apart. The man slipped his hand under the blanket.

The manager of the menswear department was gushing about how honoured he was to see the valued customer again, rubbing his hands together and bowing obsequiously. One of the bodyguards walked close to the wheelchair, checking out a man standing by the changing rooms. The man in the wheelchair smiled up at the bodyguard, but he was ignored. The silenced automatic coughed twice under the blanket and the bodyguard fell backwards, blood spreading across his white shirt from two large black holes.

The man in the wheelchair stood up, slipping out from under the blanket like a snake shedding its skin. He took three paces forward and shot the second bodyguard twice in the chest. The man was dead before his knees crumpled. The third bodyguard was reaching for his gun when he took a bullet in the sternum. As he slumped forward, clutching at his chest like a heart attack victim, the man shot him in the head, blowing blood and brain matter across the display of ties.

Shoppers began screaming and running for the exits, but the man was an oasis of calm among the panic. He aimed his gun at the Arab. The Arab's eyes widened in terror, then almost at once he visibly relaxed. The old woman was backing away, her hands held up in front of her face, her mouth open and making loud snoring sounds.

The two wives stood stock still, frozen in terror. Close up the man could see that one was dark, with brown eyes, pockmarked skin. Obviously not the centrefold.

He turned to the other woman, levelled the gun between her big blue eyes and fired, then stepped forward and shot her again in the chest as she fell.

The man spun on his heels and walked quickly to the stairs, the gun at his side. People ran from him, leaving his way clear. Shouts and screams came from behind him, but he kept on walking, his head down. He reached the stairs and went down to the ground floor, keeping the gun pressed to his side. He walked to the Egyptian Hall and took the escalator to the lower ground floor. The screams and shouts had faded away by now, and by the time he stepped off the escalator no one was paying him any attention. He turned left and walked

briskly through to the stationery department, as if he had nothing more pressing on his mind than the purchase of an executive writing set.

The door to the stationery stock room was unlocked, as he knew it would be. The man slid the gun into his belt and buttoned his jacket over it as he walked across the store room and into the entrance of the tunnel. Heating pipes ran along the length of the roof of the tunnel and he jumped up and dragged down a brown warehouseman's coat he'd stuck there earlier. The tunnel curved to the right ahead and the man could see that he was alone. He dusted the coat off and slipped it on as he walked among boxes of merchandise waiting to be taken into the store. The tunnel was the main supply route into the store, and the reason why delivery trucks were rarely seen blocking the Knightsbridge streets above.

Glancing in a circular mirror positioned at the bend of the tunnel, he saw several workmen heading his way so he kept his head down and walked purposefully. He wasn't challenged, nor had he been when he'd tried a dry run two days earlier.

Several electric cars rattled past, piled high with more boxes, but the drivers paid him no attention. The tunnel was about five hundred feet long and led to two lifts which went up to the main Harrods warehouse facilities. The man ignored the lifts and raced up the stairs to the single exit door which opened onto Trevor Square. A fresh-faced security guard, a telephone pressed to his ear, was looking his way, his mouth open in surprise, and the man pulled out his gun and shot him in the throat without even breaking stride. The security guard was still dying as the man closed the exit door and walked out into the sunshine. Ten minutes later he was on the tube, heading for Victoria Station.

Mike Cramer held the half-empty bottle of Famous Grouse in his hands, swirling the whisky around as he stared into the fire. He'd made himself a bacon sandwich earlier but it sat untouched on a plate by the chair. He could feel the whisky burning away at the lining of his empty stomach and he knew that he should eat something, but he had no appetite. A shower of soot fell down the chimney, startling him. The flue probably hadn't been swept in years, though the fire burned well enough.

He looked at his wristwatch, more out of habit than because he wanted to know the time. It wasn't as if he had anywhere to go. It was almost midnight. He sat back in the old armchair. It was comfortable and seemed to mould itself to his shape like a living thing. He'd moved it so that he could see the front door and the window and keep his back to the wall – though he was still close enough to the fire to feel its warmth. Cramer rolled his head from side to side. He could feel the tension in his neck, the muscles taut and unyielding. He yawned and his jaw clicked, another sign of the strain he was under. He got to his feet and climbed the stairs.

He hadn't been able to buy fresh sheets or a pillowcase in the village so he'd made do with the rough blankets and the stained pillow. He'd spent the night in worse places, and he had no qualms about sleeping in a dead man's bed. Cramer was well past the stage of believing in ghosts. He smiled to himself. Famous Grouse was the only spirit he had any faith in these days. He put the bottle on the floor by the bed and then took the Browning Hi-Power 9mm automatic from his shoulder holster and placed it under the pillow. It was Cramer's fifth night in the cottage. He didn't think it would be much longer.

Thomas McCormack was putting the final touches to a bright red-feathered trout fly of his own design when the phone on his workbench rang. He sighed and stopped what he was doing. It was Aidan Twomey, an old friend and colleague., but after the bare minimum of pleasantries McCormack realised that it wasn't a social call.

"There's a Brit here, Thomas," said Twomey, whispering as if he didn't want to be overheard. "Looks like a Sass-man to me. Living in old man Rafferty's cottage."

McCormack pulled a face as he studied the half-finished fly. "Sure he's not a relative?"

Twomey snorted down the phone. "Rafferty related to a Sass-man? You'll have him spinning in his grave, Thomas. Nah, Rafferty didn't have any relatives over the water. He was the last of his line. No kids and his wife died a few years back. A local solicitor sold the cottage, lock, stock and barrel. Then this Brit moves in."

"And you think he's SAS?"

"I'd bet my life on it, Thomas. He's definitely army, that's for sure. I've seen enough of the bastards in my time, you know that. He was in the pub, on his own, drinking. And he's been taking long walks, like he was waiting for something."

"Doesn't seem to be keeping a low profile, then?" said McCormack impatiently. He wondered by Twomey was bothering him with such a trivial matter. If the SAS were conducting an undercover operation in Howth, the man would hardly be drinking in the local pub.

"I was wondering if maybe the boys had anything going in Howth. Anything they'd rather keep to themselves."

"Not a thing, Aidan. Take my word for it."

"Aye, right enough, right enough. But it's the way he's carrying on. Like he was waiting for something to happen."

McCormack clicked his tongue in annoyance. Initiative was all well and good, but he didn't appreciate having his time wasted. "Well, thanks for the tip, Aidan. I'll make a note of it."

"Cramer," said Twomey. "Mike Cramer. That's his name."

McCormack's jaw dropped. "What?" he said.

"Mike Cramer. That's his name. That's what he told Pdraig in the pub. I checked with the solicitor, too, and that's the name on the deeds of the cottage."

"This Cramer. Describe him." McCormack sat hunched over the phone as he made notes on a sheet of paper, the fly forgotten.

"Just over six feet tall, thin but looks like he can take care of himself, you know. Deep-set eyes, his nose is sort of hooked and looks like it might've been broken. Brown hair, a bit long. His accent is all over the place, but he's definitely not Irish. He told Pdraig he was from Scotland originally.

"Did he tell Pdraig what he was doing in Howth?"

"Enjoying the sea air is all he said. What do you think, Thomas? Did I do the right thing calling you?"

"Oh yes," said McCormack. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you did the right thing all right. Now listen to me, Aidan, and listen well. Stay where you are. I'll have someone down there as soon as possible. Make sure no one goes near him, I don't want anyone asking him questions. I don't want him frightened off, okay?"

"Sure. But I don't think your man's going anywhere. He's well settled in at the cottage."

McCormack replaced the receiver and sat staring at his reflection in the mirror on the wall. Cramer the Sass-man back Ireland, sitting in a pub as if he didn't have a care in the world. It didn't make sense. It didn't make any sense at all.