

Roisin Byrne stared at the mirror on the elevator wall without any awareness of the image it reflected. She was too preoccupied to bother about her own appearance, and her tense, nervy disposition exposed that reality to anyone interested enough to take note. Although in the eyes of her fellow passengers, and there were only two, she went dispassionately ignored as they cocooned themselves in the narcissistic solitude of their own importance. But that could hardly be a criticism since they knew nothing about Roisin Byrne, or her problems. To them she was just a passing irritation, a minor inconvenience that stood in the way of a get-away when they reached their destination. But if you set aside her lack of physical stature, and she really was quite small, Roisin Byrne was anything but insignificant; in fact she could probably be best described as a woman on a mission. A woman with the single minded determination to protect her husband's reputation from the barrage of unfounded rumours that kept crawling out of the woodwork and go off in search of the truth, regardless of how unpalatable or incriminating that truth might prove to be.

Okay, so right now she was having a few last minute jitters, but it was nothing more than that, and they were soon forgotten when the lift slewed to a halt and a soulless monotone voice told her it was time to

make her exit. Stepping away from the cold, metal floor of the lift onto the plush carpet of the third floor corridor she hurried off in search of Brennan Associates; a private detective agency that she knew absolutely nothing about, apart from the fact that they advertised in the Yellow Pages and their Irish sounding name had taken her fancy.

Born and raised in the republican heartland of North Belfast, Roisin Byrne was accustomed, like those around her, to having her everyday life policed by the ruthlessly efficient bully boys of the IRA; a brutal and autocratic regime that demanded complete and unshakeable loyalty from its people, while at the same time suppressing any desire to seek outside help in times of crisis. Indeed any attempt to breach this ruthlessly enforced code of silence was dealt with in summary fashion, and generally provoked a late night visit from a couple of balaclava hooded thugs. A threat that made it prudent to keep such troublesome matters close to one's chest and well away from the prying eyes of officialdom. But whatever Roisin Byrne may have lacked in stature she more than made up for with character and determination.

She wasn't interested in the IRA, or their traditions, she needed professional help and had made her mind up to go and get it, regardless of the consequences. But the enormity of that decision cannot be overstated as it would almost certainly bring her into conflict with the local paramilitaries, and more likely than not with her own neighbours as well. An unpalatable thought that was lingering in the back of her mind as she went about her business.

Just along the corridor, languishing behind a well-polished desk, Jack Brennan luxuriated in the comfort of his newly acquired office suite; his recent up-market move financed to a large degree by an over-generous payment for his last assignment.

However, business wasn't quite so brisk at the moment, and his current list of assignments, which could be counted on the fingers of one hand, were nowhere near the same high calibre. So when his partner Judy advised him of Roisin Byrne's arrival he offered up a silent prayer that he wasn't about to meet and greet another scorned housewife. He'd had enough divorce cases to last him a life time, even

though such run of the mill cases were often a buffer between survival and going under in his chosen line of business; a business that by its very nature suffered more than most from peaks and troughs.

Right now it was in a trough, albeit a shallow one, but with his current overheads and meagre outlook he could ill afford the luxury of turning anything away, no matter how mundane. Although any great expectations he might have had regarding his visitor's liquidity were quickly reassessed when she was ushered through the door and immediately slotted into that formidable bracket of upper working class; a category that laid claim to Jack's own lowly start in life, and one that generally caused him little concern. What concerned him more was the fact that he did not see the potential for next month's rent standing the other side of his desk.

What stood there was a quite ordinary looking woman in her mid to late thirties, shrouded in a rather shapeless and unflattering black trouser suit with matching court shoes; a dull and decidedly unfashionable combination, which to the discerning eye did nothing to compliment an otherwise trim figure. In support of this uncaring fashion mode, if it could be called that, her small, oval shaped face was completely devoid of makeup, leaving her ashen features and worry lines openly exposed to public scrutiny, and as Jack was quick to note, there were a lot of worry lines; more than one might expect for a woman of her age. Having said that, she was not entirely without appeal, because in startling contrast to her generally dressed down appearance nature had gifted her a magnificent crop of fiery red hair. An asset clearly deserving of the lavish attention it obviously received, although apart from that one glorious attribute there was nothing else very striking or memorable about her. In fact she could quite easily be passed in the street without attracting a second glance since she made little or no effort to do otherwise.

To her credit though much of that tiresome dowdiness went unnoticed when she opened her mouth to speak; the sound she emitted was soft and lyrical, rolling off her tongue with a gentle, almost musical grace. It was reminiscent of a cool mountain stream meandering gently over well-weathered pebbles.

Sadly for Jack it was every bit as incessant, and rather than let her ramble on indefinitely he felt obliged to cut her off in mid flow.

"Can you just hold it there for a moment or two and let me check that I haven't missed anything?" His timely interruption had her squirming uneasily in her seat, a vacant and almost lifeless expression flashing a warning at him across the desk.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, her voice noticeably timid and just a touch defensive, "everything has been bottled up for so long -- it's hard to explain what these past three years have been like."

Emotional outbursts like this were a frequent occurrence with Jack's female clients, indeed there are few women in real life who enjoy baring their soul to a stranger, and even more so when that stranger happens to be a man. As a general rule, by the time they got round to seeking help from a professional like him most of his female clients had already reached the end of their tether, and were often suffering some form of emotional trauma.

But if he allowed himself to ignore her initial outpouring of emotion, then it was clear that his visitor harboured a very single minded determination to pressgang him into taking the job, although right then such a prospect didn't rest easily with him. Although that decision wasn't by any means set in stone as there was still some way to go before he would make his mind up on it.

"Let me see if I've got this right?" he said, checking his hastily scribbled notes. "You say your husband left home three years ago to go to work and has not been seen or heard from since."

She nodded her agreement.

"And you say you have had absolutely no communication from him in all that time and even his bank account has remained untouched -- is that a fair summary?" He waited for her to acknowledge before giving way to a natural instinct to speed things up. His visitor was much more vigorous in her affirmation this time, sending her mass of fiery red hair cascading about her face, its coppery

highlights glinting in the cold, white light from the neon tube above her head. He pressed on with little more urgency now.

"You say your husband has no enemies that you are aware of and you believe it's unlikely there could be another woman involved." His eyes never left her face as he watched for any giveaway reaction, but all he got was another incessant nod of the head, albeit a little slower this time to underline her single-minded opposition to the likelihood of either occurrence.

He allowed her to reflect for a few moments before asking the most obvious question of all.

"What do you think happened to your husband?"

Her hands crept up to her mouth and she stared past him at the wall behind his head, quite vacant in expression, as if he no longer existed, her head moving slowly from side to side; very slowly, and very deliberately as she thought things over.

"I really don't know," she confessed. "I have absolutely no idea. No matter how much I think about it I can't come up with anything that makes any kind of sense. Nothing makes sense to me anymore. I feel as if I'm taking part in someone else's nightmare." Her hands came away from her face and dropped into her lap where they began toying with her wedding ring, twisting the narrow gold band round and round on her finger, a far away, almost dreamy look on her face as she ignored what her fingers were doing. When she re-engaged with him there was an odd hesitancy about her, as if she was about to reveal something distasteful, or perhaps something she was reluctant to admit. "Except -----" her voice tailed off weakly, leaving an uneasy silence as she lingered over what she was about to reveal, an indication to Jack that she was undecided about sharing it with him.

"Except what?" he prompted, with little or no effect as she continued to hold back, as if fearing to voice the unwelcome thoughts that were going through her head.

When she eventually broke her silence her voice was little more than a whisper. "Some people have suggested he was murdered by the IRA."

She struggled to make herself heard as she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears, her tiny frame shuddering uncontrollably as she surrendered to her pent up emotions.

It was obvious, even to Jack, that she was a woman close to breaking point, a woman physically wilting under the strain of having to re-live her sorry tale. Her meaningless existence since the loss of her husband had exacted a heavy toll, leaving her struggling to cope with the normality's of life, and although she was finding some release in seeking professional help, her emotions were still very raw and close to the surface.

For his part Jack made a hurried and well-practiced dive for the intercom button that would connect him with Judy in the outside office. "Would you fetch Mrs Byrne a glass of water please, Judy, she's a little distressed at the moment." He remained seated until Judy took over before beating a hasty retreat to the reception area, leaving Judy to cope with the distraught woman on her own.

Little episodes like this occurred frequently enough for him to be well practiced in the art of delegation. He simply off-loaded the problem onto the more than capable shoulders of his hard done by partner, while he waited quietly in the wings for her to resolve the situation.

As it happened Roisin Byrne proved to be much grittier than she had at first looked and regained a reasonable semblance of composure with surprising speed, allowing Judy to get back to her work and Jack to ease gently back to the business at hand.

"Do you feel comfortable enough to go on?" he asked.

She gave him a coy look. "Yes of course, I'm sorry about that. It all gets a bit difficult at times," she confessed, wiping her eyes with a seriously over-used paper tissue, and although he was keen to press on Jack was nevertheless reluctant to push her too hard, and allowed her ample time to gather herself before continuing.

"Why would anyone believe your husband to have been murdered by the IRA?" he asked.

"It's just where we live," she countered, as if such a solitary admission needed no further explanation.

"It's a hard line nationalist area, and lots of people go missing for no apparent reason. It's all part of The Troubles, so I suppose it's the only rational explanation our neighbours can put on Tony's disappearance."

Jack was studying her more closely now, trying to see beyond the outer façade, but even then he believed instinctively that what he perceived her to be was exactly what she was. There were no hidden depths, no artificial fronts, she was just an ordinary working class housewife. A woman in total despair, if nonetheless determined to unravel the mystery as to why her husband had vanished and left her to cope with life on her own.

"Do you have any reason to believe the IRA was responsible for his disappearance?" he asked.

She faced his enquiring gaze without flinching. "No I do not." She sounded seriously resolute on the matter.

"Tony is a wonderful husband and a very law abiding citizen. He's an open book really and we don't keep secrets from one another." Her eyes narrowed noticeably as she looked at him. "I would know if he was involved in something that might cause that to happen -- believe me -- I would know."

It was impossible to ignore the way she insisted on referring to her husband in the present tense. A trait that alerted Jack to the likelihood that she still expected to find her husband alive -- even after three long years, and in circumstances such as those she had described. He perceived that attitude to be an extraordinary act of faith, especially for someone living in a war torn city like Belfast.

"What did your husband do for a living? Where did he work?" he asked.

"He's a heavy goods driver for a local transport company," she explained, deliberately correcting his use of the past tense before giving him the details of her husband's employer.

Reaching across the desk Jack placed a blank sheet of paper and a pencil in front of her.

"I'd like you to jot down the names and addresses of any close friends and relatives you can think of. Telephone numbers as well if you have them. It would be really helpful if you include anyone your husband might have been closely involved with, socially or otherwise, prior to his disappearance."

Getting up from his chair he headed towards the outer office, placing a hand lightly on her shoulder as he passed her by.

"I'm just popping next door for a few moments, so there's no need for you to rush things, take as long as you have to. I would rather you took your time over it and got it right at this early stage, because what you give me now will determine where any investigation is likely to begin." Turning on his heel he went through the door, easing it closed behind him.

Judy glanced up as he approached. She was wearing a well-tailored two piece suit, beige in colour, her naturally blonde hair acting as a shoulder length frame for her delicately tanned and pretty features. As a general rule she didn't wear a lot of jewellery and her choice today was limited to a five stone ruby ring on her left hand, and a large silver locket that hung round her neck and was occupying both hands as she ran it backwards and forwards along the length of its heavy silver chain. When she saw Jack approaching she quickly averted her attention to the computer monitor and carried on working the keyboard.

"Something a little bit intriguing about this one -- if we decide to take it on," he told her, a cautionary note in his voice. The main cause of his doubt being the needling uncertainty over his client's ability to finance what could be a long and drawn out investigation.

"Having said that," he went on, "I'm quite interested -- but only if our dear little lady in there can come up with the necessary readies." There was a tentative note to his voice that caused Judy to look up from what she was doing. A response he had been hoping for as he was keen to judge her reaction to what he was about to say next.

"There's a slight chance it might involve our old friends the Provo's again."

He took care not to make his explanation sound too threatening, but failed with his effort because Judy's eyes darted back to the computer keyboard in an all fired hurry, too much of a hurry as it happened, and although she didn't actually express any direct opposition, the look on her face told the whole story.

"A decision like that wouldn't be down to you alone," she reminded him, "even if you are the senior partner." She made little effort to disguise her anxiety. "I think in the circumstances it might be more diplomatic to discuss it with Mairead as well before you commit us to anything we might not have the resources to handle."

"Where is Mairead by the way?" he asked, fearing it might need a three way debate to resolve the matter, especially if Judy decided to dig her heels in, she was quite capable of doing just that if the mood took her.

He reached out and picked up the desk diary to check Mairead's schedule.

"She's still hunting down that ghost finance company," she told him, "the one that did a runner on its investor's. She's not due back from London until our next board meeting. I've been trying to get her on the phone about another matter but she must be in a meeting or something as she's not answering."

"Of course," he mused, "I remember now -- well in that case I guess it's up to me to decide, we certainly can't keep that little lady next door hanging around while we try to track her down."

If Judy heard what he said she didn't show it, she remained in her seat with her back turned towards him, stony faced, typing furiously at the keyboard while displaying a total lack of interest in the problem. Jack found her sullen behaviour a trifle irritating and demonstrated his feelings by slamming the desk diary down noisily on the worktop beside her, then turned on his heel and headed back to his visitor, his

mind occupied with the unhappy thought that dinner that evening would likely be a silent and tetchy ordeal.

Roisin Byrne appeared not to have moved a muscle during his absence, she was holding the sheet of paper he'd left her with at arm's length, her expression vacant enough to indicate that her mind was somewhere else. Sliding back into his seat Jack reached out and eased it from her grasp.

"Right then," he said with a slight smile, "let's see what we've got." The smile didn't linger, because when he checked the list she had put together he was disappointed to see there were only three names on it; one under the heading relatives and even more alarmingly only two under the heading of friends!

He struggled to suppress the thoughts going through his head and not express them aloud, indeed he had to think very carefully before saying anything at all.

"Who was the last person to see your husband before he disappeared?" He was silently praying it was someone other than the woman sat in front of him, since it was painfully obvious from their earlier conversation that she had nothing more to offer.

"That would be Tony's brother, Alfie, he always gives him a lift to work."

The list he was holding told him that Alfie lived at the top of the Grosvenor Road. A borderline area as far as national allegiances go in Belfast.

"And did he drop your husband off as usual on the day he went missing?"

She nodded briskly.

"Yes, he did, he dropped him off as usual and remembers seeing him waiting to cross the road to go into the depot as he drove off." She paused momentarily before adding. "The strange thing is that none of the other workers in the depot saw him arrive for work that morning, nor have any of them seen him since."

Jack wanted more from her, much more, he needed her to open up and be a bit more intimate; more candid, more emotional even, but she had a stubborn reserve about her that he found less than helpful.

“What sort of relationship do you have with your brother in-law? Are you on good terms with each other?”

It was a question that took them into a very delicate area, but it was a question that simply begged to be asked. Especially where a missing person was involved, and even more so where the outcome of any investigation would probably produce nothing more than a body for burial, perhaps not even that after such a long time.

Statistics leaned heavily in the direction of family members or close friends as the culprits in most murder cases, so it was important ground that needed to be covered no matter how delicate. As it turned out, his immediate concerns appeared to be unfounded as his visitor's reaction was instantaneous and very reassuring.

“Oh yes, we get on like a house on fire -- Alfie's a lovely man - we're very close friends as well as being related through marriage.”

She gave the matter some added thought, and being perceptive to Jack's needs, added, with a certain amount of conviction. “Nobody who knows Tony would deliberately cause him any harm.”

Her thoughts went straight back to the list she had just compiled and she sensibly concluded that it had some obvious shortcomings.

“To be perfectly honest, I could list every last one of our neighbours as a friend to Tony. He's immensely popular with everyone who knows him and never has a cross word to say about anyone or anything.”

Her insistence to speak of her husband in the present tense alarmed Jack a little, and he was unsure whether to mark it down to innocent naivety or lack of judgment? In either event it had all the hallmarks of being a problem further down the line and would need dealing with sooner rather than later, an issue he found rather disconcerting.

“Tell me about this guy, Dessie Graham,” he prompted, raising his eyes from the list.

"As I've just told you, Mr. Brennan, Tony is extremely friendly with everyone, but Dessie is a very dear friend, the two of them go back a long way. They grew up together -- even played football in the same team when they were youngsters.

She smiled tamely at the happy recollection before continuing.

"And unlike others I could mention they never allowed the difference in their religious backgrounds to interfere with their friendship, no matter what was going on around them, and at times there was a lot going on as I'm sure you know."

The significance of what she'd said didn't appear to have registered with her, nor was she aware of the impact it had on Jack, who almost fell out of his chair at the frightening possibilities it opened up. Their religious differences might be totally unconnected to the problem in hand, but in Northern Ireland being the wrong religion could quite easily get you killed, especially if you happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. A thought that caused a few extra worry lines to visit his brow.

Roisin Byrne's fidgety movement distracted him from the problem as she fumbled with the flap of her handbag; reaching inside she came out with a postcard sized photograph that she slid somewhat hesitantly across the polished surface towards him, looking just a little bit reluctant to part with it.

"That's Tony on the left with Dessie beside him; it was taken the summer before he went missing."

Jack picked it up and ran his eyes over it.

There was nothing unusual about the missing man that could be identified from the photograph, he was just an average looking guy in his mid to late thirties, with neatly combed, dark wavy hair and clean shaven features. He was casually but tidily dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans and a grey crew-neck sweater with loafer style shoes. He certainly had a fresh, easy going look about him that supported his wife's description, although as Jack knew from previous experience, looks can often be deceiving.

The other guy in the photograph had much the same fresh faced appearance, and although he was wearing jeans as well, his were matched with a blue sweatshirt with a large sporting logo across the front in big white letters. Both men had their arms around each other's shoulders and were grinning quite happily and looked to be enjoying themselves, making it the sort of holiday snap one would expect to see of a couple of good friends on a day out together.

Setting it aside Jack concentrated on his visitor's reaction to his next question.

"What have the police said about your husband's disappearance?"

Roisin Byrne looked away, fumbling much more incessantly with the shredded tissue, seemingly mesmerized by the antics of her own busy little fingers as they distributed more litter on Jack's desk.

In reality she was attempting to shield herself from his intense scrutiny, which in the circumstances was probably normal enough. Although it was beginning to look as though she was experiencing some difficulty as she buried her face in her hands and gave a loud sigh. It was some time before she got round to answering Jack's question, and even then her voice lacked enthusiasm.

"From what I can gather their investigation has come up against a brick wall. In fact I haven't heard anything from them for some time." She made no effort to hide her disappointment and came across as weary and vulnerable at that particular moment.

"I'm sure you know what it can be like when the police try to investigate something like this. No one wants to be seen to be co-operating with them in a nationalist area like ours." The despair in her voice was becoming much more evident. "I honestly believe they did everything they could in the circumstances, and I'm not blaming them for any lack of progress; it's so very difficult for them these days as I'm sure you are aware."

Her charitable tolerance and understanding of the difficulties faced by the Royal Ulster Constabulary took Jack a little by surprise and had him nursing a sense of admiration for the woman, albeit that she was

in the process of covering his desk in shreds of torn tissue. Unable to restrain himself he reached out and plucked the shredded remnants from her grasp.

His visitor responded by folding her arms and tucking her hands up under her armpits, as if to keep her mischievous little fingers out of harm's way, while at the same time offering a guilty, almost child-like smile by way of apology.

"If the police were going to make any headway in finding out what happened to Tony I'm pretty certain they would have done so by now-- don't you?" she asked, her expression openly inviting contradiction. An invitation Jack declined, since there was nothing in what she had told him so far to warrant contradiction.

"I think you're probably right," he confessed, using the opportunity to benchmark what was clearly a sad but almost certain reality. There was nothing to be gained from raising her expectations unnecessarily, especially as the case would have long since been filed under the unsolved category by the RUC, maybe not quite a dead file – but after three years, most certainly one in need of life support.

Jack spent the remainder of the session using an open question technique, a well proven routine that ensured a full response to every question he asked rather than a straight forward yes or no. By design it helped to expose as much information as was available in the shortest possible time, but as he was soon to discover, the longer their session went on the more repetitive it became, and it was soon apparent that the woman had nothing more to offer that would be helpful.

In the end there was only one other topic of importance left to be discussed before Jack could make his decision on whether or not to take the case, and it wouldn't wait forever.

"I think we have probably gone as far as we can for now," he admitted, "which takes us to the more mundane matter of my fee I'm afraid."

There were still a niggling little doubt in the back of his mind about her ability to pay the going rate, especially if the investigation proved

to be as drawn out as he believed it might be. But even with that concern in mind, there was something about the woman's grit and determination that captured his admiration, and made him hopeful they could work out something agreeable between them.

"There isn't any charge for this initial interview," he explained "but I need a five hundred pound retainer to get me started, which although non-returnable is deducted from any final payment -- after that it's eighty pounds an hour, plus expenses. "

He watched her do some mental arithmetic and was a little surprised that she didn't seem unduly concerned. Indeed her only physical reaction was to clutch her handbag closer to her chest, as if determined to hold on to whatever valuable asset was stored inside. He continued to wonder what her reply would be.

"Tony and I have joint savings of a little over ten thousand pounds, and I will happily spend every last penny of it if that's what it takes to find out what happened to him."

The only indication that Jack had heard her was a slight nod of his head as he reached for the intercom button one more time.

"Can you come in for a moment, Judy?" he said, then quickly switched his attention back to his client. "We will need a few personal details from you before you go, and in the meantime I'll get things under way by seeing what I can find out from the police. I have a few contacts there that might prove useful."

Judy bustled in before he could say any more, an enquiring look on her face.

"Mrs. Byrne and I have agreed terms, Judy, so perhaps you would take her with you and draw up the necessary paperwork."

Judy gave him somewhat withering look, although in fairness it only lasted a second or two before it was replaced by a forced but friendly smile as she turned to their visitor. "This shouldn't take more than a few minutes and then you can be on your way."

Their client left her seat and followed Judy's lead to the door, but stopped unexpectedly before she got there and turned back to face Jack again.

"My husband is a decent, God fearing man, Mr. Brennan -- I'd like you to remember that please. Whatever has happened to him was not of his doing, I'm certain of that, and whatever the outcome of all this, I want him back -- even his bones -- if that's all there is." She turned on her heel and squeezed past Judy to disappear from view.