

CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't just an old bed, its edges piled high with a confection of pink fluffy pillows and the mattress sagging contentedly - it was an altar - a pink, fluffy, marital altar. Monica Moran heaved a huge sigh and let the last of her tears fall. The salty drops slid down her face, over her heaving breasts and dripped onto what lap she had left. Opposite her, Imelda Hegarty watched sympathetically.

'Are you okay, Monica?'

Monica nodded. She looked around the room with a dazed expression and sighed again. Through the open wardrobe doors she could see bulging rails of clothes, every frill and flounce in wonderful shades of cream, cerise and violet and at the end of the rail, six or seven hangers with a man's shirt on each. Then she swung her gaze onto a photograph on the dressing table. A couple beamed at her - the wife glowing with pleasure as she lay back on a deckchair having ice cream fed to her by a small man wearing baggy trunks and a *Kiss me Quick* hat. 'He did look nice, though, didn't he?'

Imelda regarded the photograph seriously. 'Well actually, I always think a cap - '

'No - I mean at the funeral parlour! He looked nice didn't he, all laid out in his clean overalls.' She sniffed again. 'I always did like a man in overalls, all compact and packaged neatly in his little suit with only the one zip down the middle...' Her voice trailed off.

Imelda watched her, frowning.

Monica scowled. 'Don't look at me like that, Mel. I do like men in overalls, uniforms - whatever - and I used to have one.' She flicked the photo onto its face. 'And now I don't have one any more!' Then she threw back her head and howled.

As the noise rose to a deafening pitch Imelda rushed over to the windows to close them. The neighbours would think there was a banshee in the place with the racket Monica was making. Poor Mon. If ever a woman needed a man in her life it was Monica Moran and now she had none. Imelda peered out onto the street to see if the commotion had attracted attention. It had. Two fellows offloading ladders from a van opposite were watching the house and the window cleaner next door was leaning over so far he'd be the next one to be buried if he wasn't careful. Imelda shook her head. Monica's husband may have preceded her to the hereafter but her reputation was preceding her in the here and now. News of her widowhood spread like a rash and there were plenty of boyos willing to come round and rub cream on it. Crossly, Imelda glared through the panes and then pulled the curtains shut.

'Monica,' she said, 'we need to have a talk.'

Monica's howls subsided - slightly.

'I don't want you rushing into anything now that you might regret later.'

Monica lifted a foot gingerly. Even in the dim light her high black stilettos looked painfully tight and uncomfortable. 'I'd be lucky if I could rush anywhere in these bloody things! What're you talking about anyway?'

Imelda took a deep breath. 'You know, Monica - men. Now that your Fred's no longer with us you will need a bit of time to yourself, to get over it and all.'

From outside there was the sound of a ladder being positioned against a wall and someone starting to whistle. Monica smiled. 'Oh Mel - you're such a worrier! You don't really think I'd be interested in replacing my Fred as quick as that.' She prised the shoes off then limped to the window. Pulling the curtain open she watched the

window cleaner as he bent and rinsed his cloths in a large bucket of soapy water. When he turned to go up the ladder again, he waved at her. Monica waved shyly back. 'Though I mightn't say no to an entirely different model!'

'Monica!'

'Only joking! Don't fuss, Mel. You don't think I'd seriously be bothered with anyone around here, do you. They're all fly-by-nights anyway.' She sighed and flopped onto the bed again. 'My days of de-springing mattresses are over.' She sniffed. 'If I were to go looking for a new man he'd have to be someone really special. Someone unique.'

She shut her eyes and after a last few tearful gulps, fell asleep. Imelda waited till the sound of her snores filled the room before she opened the windows again. One blast of those snores and the hopefuls might think they were already too late and leave. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and watched her friend. Asleep, Monica looked so vulnerable; awake, the rest of the world was. Imelda could feel the knot of anxiety twist in her tummy again. What was she to do? If she didn't shift the grieving widow out of Dublin in the next week you wouldn't be able to breath for the pheromones. She patted her chest, it was already playing up with the stress. Monica couldn't go abroad after what happened the last time and she didn't have any relatives in the country as far as Imelda knew. She picked up one of the cushions and plucked at the fur anxiously. Dammit, where's your family when you need them?

As she twisted the cushion hairs around her finger and watched while the top went blue, Imelda thought about her own family. If she were widowed, she'd be fine. Her family was large and supportive and most of them married with families of their own, excepting Sean and Cormac, of course. Sean, for the last fifteen years Parish Priest of the small, if significant Parish of Tullabeg in Kilkenny and Cormac, estate agent, recently moved there from Dublin. Cormac, a fifty-two-year-old bachelor in a decent parish who had too little interest in altars and too much in altar boys. Imelda shook her head. There's another problem she'd have to give some thought to. If they didn't sort him out soon, the family reputation was at stake. Sean had said as much on the phone but she didn't know what he expected her to do about it. Cormac wasn't in Dublin any more so it's not as if the problem was on her doorstep; he was in Tullabeg, way down the country. Anyway, sorting Cormac was a huge task, always had been. He was a difficult case, a special case, unique.

Unique! With a loud snort, Monica turned over in the bed and landed Imelda, who had been perched on the edge of it, onto the floor. Imelda didn't mind. The solution was there. Cormac needed sorting and Monica needed a unique man, a well-sprung mattress sort of man, to keep her on the straight and narrow.

She clapped her hands in excitement at the brilliance of her idea - two birds killed with one stone, slung into the same bush, as it were. Monica would probably sleep for hours and by the time she woke, Imelda would have it all arranged. A quick letter to Sean outlining her intention to visit but without any of the details - men were so hopeless at subtlety and anyway, he and Monica always seemed a bit awkward with one another. She'd say it was on account of their recent conversations and Sean could make what he liked of it. She'd just bring Monica to Tullabeg and unleash her on the needy Cormac. Nature would surely take its course and all their problems would be solved.

And everyone would be happy.

In the study of the priest's house in the parish of Tullabeg, two men sat facing each other over a tray. The priest's housekeeper, Miss Teegan, hovered by the door hoping

to catch a glimpse of the errant speck of dust that would require her immediate attention. Beady eyes darted over the picture frames and she tutted in annoyance at the state of them. They were spotless. She tried the side table - spotless too. Aware that Father Hegarty was watching her crossly, she hovered a minute longer, willing to run the risk of a lambasting later about what he liked to call 'stickybeaking'. It might be worth it. The priest's visitor was his brother, Cormac Hegarty, one of the top estate agents in the county, wealthy by anyone's standards, handsome by hers - and unmarried.

'Ahem.'

'Father?'

'Was there something else, Bernadette?'

Miss Teegan inclined her head to one side and looked puzzled. 'Something else, Father? '

Father Hegarty spit the words through clenched teeth and she noticed that he was tapping the arm of the chair. 'You appear to be waiting for something.'

Miss Teegan threw her head back in what she hoped was a flirtatious toss of her newly released curls. 'Oh, not at all Father. I was just checking to see that you had every thing you wanted - is there nothing I could get for you. Maybe,' she patted the curls she could feel caressing the nape of her neck, 'a couple more sandwiches?'

Both men looked at the tray. There were two saucers with china cups balanced precariously on top, a milk jug, sugar bowl, and a silver tea strainer in a dish squeezed onto one end. The rest of the space was taken up by an enormous platter of sandwiches of every make and shape, with and without crusts. Father Hegarty stifled a sigh and spoke slowly. 'Bernadette, we have enough sandwiches.'

'Maybe some buns then?'

He looked at the plate of cup cakes balanced on the tray's edge; each decorated with white icing and a selection of either chocolate drops or melted fruit gums. 'No.'

Miss Teegan heard the note of finality in his voice barely masked by the tapping of his fingers. He always did that just before he shouted at her. With a quick glance of regret at the brother, she nodded. 'Right so, Father. Call if you need anything. I mean you might fancy a - '

'Bernadette Teegan! '

'Yes, Father, thank you Father.' She turned on her heel and left the room before he had time to say any more.

As he heard the squeaking of Hush Puppies on vinyl recede down the hallway, Father Sean was aware that the room had become very quiet. Breathing a long slow sigh of relief, he lowered himself back into the chair. 'That woman,' he confided to his brother, 'will be the death of me.'

Cormac leaned forward and took his time choosing a sandwich. 'Do you know what your trouble is, Sean?' he said. 'She has you spoilt. Would you look at the feed she has for us here - ham sandwiches, egg sandwiches, salad sandwiches and look - fairy cakes! I love those!' He reached over and took one of the two fairy cakes, laden with cream that she had nudged onto the edge of the plate at the last minute. 'Positively sinful!' Licking the cream from round the sides of it, he smiled at his brother.

Sean tried to smile back but a complete lack of any sort of Christian feeling prevented his face from rising to anything more convivial than a grimace. He didn't know who was worse, his middle-aged coquette of a housekeeper who tried to feed every bachelor in the country to the altar or his soft-bodied brother who hadn't been

near an altar for years. Two problems who deserved each other. He watched while Cormac's pink tongue caressed the confection as if food was due to go out of fashion and he wouldn't get the taste of it forever after. In and out it went, probing, licking and all the while Cormac kept his eyes shut to stave off any distraction.

Eventually the cream was gone so he popped the sponge into his mouth and raised an eyebrow. 'So, what did you want to see me for?'

Sean tried to look as non-committal as he could. 'Well, you're my brother, aren't you? Do I need to have a reason to see you?'

Cormac tapped the side of his nose and narrowed his eyes. 'Now Father,' his tone mildly disapproving. 'Would that be an example of withholding the truth?'

Sean was tapping the chair's arm again. 'For the love of God, what are you on about? Do you not think I have enough to be doing in a parish the size of this without wasting time getting to the point - if there was a point I was intending to get to, of course.'

'Of course,' Cormac was starting on the cup cakes.

Sean sat back in his chair. 'Anyway, as I was saying, Bernadette Teegan.'

Cormac peeled the paper carefully from the sides of his cake. 'What about her?'

'A fine woman.' Ignoring the shift of Cormac's eyebrow, he leaned over and let his index finger hover over the platter of sandwiches, pointing to each one in turn as if both of them didn't know that a sandwich was two slices of bread with ham and ham only between them. Eventually, he picked up a ham sandwich and took a bite. 'Generous, god fearing, decent...'

'Irritating, nosey...'

Sean cleared his throat. 'God-fearing, decent, healthy and...' he took another bite as he tried to work out how best to portray Bernadette's most appealing credential. 'And...'

'And?'

'Available! For God's sake, Cormac! What do you want me to say? Don't you know it yourself? Available! That's what she is and you should be down on your knees thanking God for it!'

Cormac stifled a laugh. 'Ah now, Sean. You don't really expect me to consider a trip up the aisle with Bernadette Teegan, do you?'

'And why not?' Now that he had declared his purpose, Sean was feeling a little more confident. 'There are worse women qualified for burial in our family plot.'

Cormac pulled a sultana out of his bun and laid it carefully on the side of the plate. 'Oh, now if it's burying her you're planning, that's a different matter altogether.' His eyes were twinkling with merriment. 'For a minute there I thought you might be suggesting I marry her!'

Sean grasped the arms of his chair and counted slowly to ten. He opened his mouth but shut it again as a faint yipping nudged the edges of his consciousness. It sounded like someone trying to tiptoe on rubber heels so that they couldn't be heard. It sounded like someone not succeeding. It grew louder and louder till eventually she appeared in the doorway.

'Father?' She raised herself onto the balls of her feet, framed in the doorway as if for flight should this be a bad moment.

'Yes, Bernadette.' Sean's voice was flat.

'This came for you em, recently, Father. I thought to bring it earlier but seeing as you had a family visitor already...' She held out the letter. 'There's a Dublin postmark, maybe it's...?'

Sean looked at the envelope, one eyebrow raised. He turned it over carefully. Despite the fact that it was a fresh dry day outside, the seal was puckered where it had dried. 'Thank you, Bernadette, I've been expecting this. Whoever it was sent me this must have a powerful wet tongue, don't you think? It actually looks as if it's been opened and sealed a couple of times. When I get a chance, I might open it and read it myself. Was there anything else?'

'There was not.' Face reddening, she executed a perfect pirouette and made for the door.

'Shut it, please!'

She flashed a look of resentment at him as she pulled the door after her but they could both hear her humming her defiance down the hallway in time to her squeaking soles.

When he was sure that she was well and truly away, Sean looked at the envelope. There was a Dublin postmark on it right enough and below that the meticulous handwriting they both knew so well. *The Rev. Father Sean Hegarty, P.P.* and underneath, *Parish Priest* written in bold and underlined. He held the envelope up for Cormac to see. 'Oh dear, is it that time of the year again?'

Cormac squinted across. 'Who is it?'

'Imelda.'

'Our sister Imelda?' Cormac put the bun down and wiped his lips with the linen napkin Bernadette had so thoughtfully placed on his side of the tray. 'When is she coming?'

Sean pulled the envelope open, trying to ignore the sticky seal. 'She's coming... let me see now... how are you, hope all's well... blah, blah, blah... hope to travel... *spend the...* Oh no!'

'What is it?'

'A fortnight - she's planning to stay a week with each of us. She'll call in a couple of days with further details.' The brothers looked at each other. Both had plans for the next few weeks and none of those involved having the air sucked out of every room they chose to sit in by the sombre presence of their sister. The prospect was dismal. Eventually Cormac spoke.

'Can't you put her off? Invent an epidemic or a religious festival or something?'

Sean turned the envelope over. 'Afraid not,' he sighed, 'though *I* will be very busy. Maybe she could be some help to you about the office, you know, a woman's touch?' The postmark was four days old. 'The kettle mustn't be working as well as usual. This was posted on Monday.' He folded the letter and put it into his breast pocket. 'And now it's Thursday. Chin up little brother and get your house in order. Like it or not, she'll be here Saturday.'

Bernadette Teegan opened the door of her green Mini Metro and adjusted the cushion on the driver's seat. Still smarting from the imperious tone Father Hegarty had used, she didn't trust herself to start up the engine straightaway so she closed her eyes and sat back in the seat for a minute.

He's a pig, God forgive me, she thought to herself, a man of God indeed. There's not an ounce of Christian charity or kind feeling in that one at all. She sighed deeply as she felt the heat of her frustration prickling behind her eyelids. He's not a bit like Father Barry, so he isn't. Before the heat engendered by the memory of Father Barry started prickling anywhere else she opened her eyes with a 'tut' and did the

routine checks before starting the car. The steering wheel cover was unruffled, St Christopher centred on the dashboard and her skirt smooth. 'Right so,' she said aloud. 'Home for the tea.'

On automatic pilot the car reversed out of the driveway and should have turned neatly on the grassy area beside the gate, but suddenly there was a shout behind her and she slammed on the brakes. A young lad of about eighteen was spread-eagled across the back window.

'Michael! What are you doing here?'

'Getting killed - did you not see me?' Behind the carpet of pimples, freckles and fluff, his face was white with fright. 'You nearly ran me over!'

'Well, in the middle of the gateway's a very stupid place to be standing when someone is trying to back out!'

'What? You weren't even looking!'

'Oh, you are a stupid boy.' She opened the door and climbed out. 'A very stupid boy.' She leaned into the car to readjust the cushion, which had shot forward when she slammed the brakes. The motion of stroking velvet calmed her. 'Why would I have to look when you weren't supposed to be there in the first place?' she asked him sweetly.

'But Auntie Bernadette...' He shut his mouth again. There was no point trying to argue. Bernadette Teegan did not indulge in arguments. Her philosophy on disagreement was simple and straightforward. She was right - always. And as an argument meant that she would have to spend precious time engaged in conversation with someone who was clearly misguided, ill-informed or just plain stupid, she would not indulge. He raised his hands, palms upwards and let them fall again despondently.

Seeing that he was not going to try and justify his unpredictable behaviour and was probably sorry for the distress he had caused her so late in the afternoon, Bernadette softened even more. She reached out and patted his shoulder. 'There you are, dear,' she said. 'Just be more careful in future. Now, what are you doing here? Did you want a lift home?'

Michael straightened and smirked at her. 'I don't actually. I'm here to see Father Hegarty.'

'Father Hegarty? You? Oh, Michael, you haven't been bad, have you?'

'I have not! Why do you always assume that I'm in the wrong?' There was that note of petulance in his voice that always softened her cough. His father had been the same.

'Michael, it's twenty past five on Thursday afternoon. I am just setting off home for the tea. When I get there, I expect to find you lounging on the sofa, your feet up and the paper crumpled on the floor beside you - testament to the fact that you've managed to rouse yourself long enough to turn to the three back pages and look at the pictures. And the reason I expect to find you there, is that I always find you there.' She peered at him closely. 'Because Michael, that's what you do. You lie on sofas and you lounge.' She threw her arms out and with a wide dramatic sweep indicated the driveway of the Tullabeg Presbytery. 'But you're not there, are you? You're here, on your way to see the priest.'

'It doesn't mean I've done anything wrong.'

'If you haven't the manners,' she spoke slowly and with great emphasis, 'or the guts to discuss it with me first, then it's unlikely to mean you've done anything right.'

'Oh, for - ' He swallowed as he tried to regain the self-control she had struggled for years to instil. 'I don't know what he wants me for. I haven't found out yet. He didn't say. He rang me up about an hour ago and asked me if I was busy. I said

I wasn't. He said "good man, well I might have something for you, so." I said that'd be grand. He said, "well, could you come round?" I said I could. He said when. I said straightaway. He said "could you leave it an hour or so?" I said I could. So I did. I left it an hour then I put on my jacket and I came round. And then you nearly ran me over in the driveway but I survived and that's it. That's all there is to it. Are you happy?' He was breathless by now and his face was red with exertion.

For a minute she said nothing. That was a strange thing all right. What job could Father Hegarty possibly have for Michael and why would he not discuss it with her first? And why would he ask Michael to wait an hour? Only that she had stayed on to finish ironing the tea towels she'd have left ages ago and missed Michael to give him a lift home. As it happened, she'd only just missed him in the gateway. She'd have to give this one a bit of thought. Stalling for time, she looked Michael up and down. 'Well, you'd better calm yourself and go on in so,' she said. 'And straighten your collar and don't slouch when you're talking to him.'

He glared and turned away from her.

'And if he offers you a cup of tea, don't have it, I'm only after finishing tidying away and I have the best buns here with me anyway. You'll be getting them for your tea!' He didn't turn round. 'Oh well!' She shrugged her shoulders in resignation and got back into her car, muttering, 'that's young people for you. You do what you can to help but you really wouldn't want to be waiting for a word of thanks, you really wouldn't.'

She sat there in the growing gloom watching as he reached the front door. With the window open she could hear the bell jangle faintly in the distance and waited to see what happened when the door opened, though her view was mostly blocked by the trees on the drive. She couldn't be seen from the house and there'd be no point in her starting up the car now, drawing attention to the fact that she was there - the noise of it might muffle the sound of the bell. And anyway she had a sneaking suspicion that Father Hegarty deliberately arranged for Michael to come over when she had already left. She usually left at five on a Thursday and called in at the supermarket on the way home. He knew that. He'd often asked her to get things for him. And it wasn't as if he hadn't seen her to mention it either. She'd gone in to take the tea tray when he and his visitor had finished tea. She'd shown Cormac to the door and held it open while the two men said their goodbyes. Her cheeks burned at the recollection. 'Thank you, Bernadette, you don't have to stand there while I see my brother out the door. I'll be able to manage that one on my own.' The sarcastic way of him! Who did he think he was?

At that, a movement up at the house caught her eye. A light had gone on in the upstairs front room and through the opened curtains she could see Michael and Father Hegarty standing in the room looking all about them. Father Hegarty was pointing here and there and Michael was following his finger and nodding. They stayed like that for a few minutes and then the light went out. She waited but there was nothing at all. It was growing darker and though she had planned to get a nice head of lettuce from Supasave on the way home there really was no point now. Anything left at this stage would be limp and useless. She tutted crossly. Men and lettuces, wasn't it always the same? What a bother. Now she'd have to go shopping in the morning and she'd wanted to spend tomorrow at home.

Bernadette did not work Fridays. As it was a day of fast, Father Hegarty had little use for her on a Friday, but she'd left him a nice tin of salmon and a new potato salad for his lunch anyway. She'd made it fresh this morning thinking Cormac might come early and fancy a bit of lunch but then he was delayed and that put himself into

a mood. There'd been more than enough and she scolded herself for not taking a bit home. Oh well, the best laid plans and all that. She checked her watch - five past - where was the boy? Surely if Father had a job for him he wasn't expecting the lad to stay there and do it straight away? What could be going on?

She toyed with the notion of driving up closer to the house. She could always say there was something she's forgotten to get, or maybe she could remind him about the potato salad. That'd be the thing. Maybe when she mentioned it earlier he wasn't really listening and wouldn't know tomorrow that it was there and only bread and fish on a Friday would be a bit too frugal, even for a parish priest.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a noise from the side of the house. She sat up straight and peered into the darkness. There was a roar of mechanical origin as an engine was sparked into life, followed by enthusiastic revving. Bernadette's heart lurched. Around the side of the house two lights appeared low on the gravel and jerked their way along the drive. She knew what they were. As if the years were being peeled back, it all came into focus and Bernadette Teegan recognised the headlights of the late Father Barry's Volvo as it juddered towards her in the soft twilight. The exhaust belched as the car came nearer then stopped with a panicked jolt. Through a cloud of exhaust fumes she could hear the familiar swish as the driver's window was rolled down.

'Aunty Bernadette! What are you doing here still?'

With a shudder, she came down to earth. 'Michael? Is that you?' She leaned out and caught sight of the boy sitting behind the wheel as if it was his place to be there. 'What are you doing in Father Barry's car? Get out of it this minute!'

Michael's face pulled back into the car's dark interior. 'Father Hegarty said I could use it! He said it was okay!' He had his hand on the window lever as if ready to roll it up if the need arose.

'Did he now? And what do you need a car for? Haven't you me like an eejit driving you anywhere you need to go - and not a penny on you to go anywhere anyway.' The sight of anyone sitting in Father Barry's precious car filled her with rage, even if the anyone was Michael. Especially when the anyone was Michael.

'It's okay, Aunty Bernadette, honestly it is. I'm only having it for the loan, while I'm doing the job. Father Hegarty said it'd be okay and I can take as long as I like, two weeks at least he said.'

'You're going to work for Father Hegarty for two weeks?' She couldn't imagine anyone willing to entrust a job to Michael for one week, never mind inviting him to take two. 'What are you going to do?'

Michael puffed out his chest. 'Well, he said there were plenty of other fellows in the town who could do it but they were a bit quick and he wanted a fellow who would be prepared to take his time and do a really good job. I'm to start Saturday morning.'

'Start what? What is it he wants you to do?'

Michael grinned. 'He's going to have the furniture removed by tomorrow and then I'll be here at nine on Saturday. He said I'm to be well into it by the time the Dublin bus arrives.'

'Into what?'

'Nothing too difficult,' His newfound career, however temporary, was making him brave. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist. I'm his new interior decorator.'

She peered into the darkness in disbelief. 'Father Hegarty is trusting you to decorate his house? He doesn't need the house decorated.'

'He hasn't asked me to decorate the *whole* house.'

Suddenly she remembered the light in the upstairs front room, and earlier the letter she had delivered to Father in the parlour. The letter from his sister saying she was coming to stay. There was still a ghost of a smile on Michael's face and it rekindled as she beamed at him.

'Of course, you'd be the perfect person for the job, pet. Father Hegarty knows as well as the next man how carefully you'd tackle a job like that, and how you'd take your time over it. And he said you were to take two weeks, did he?'

He was nodding.

'And there's only the one room to do, isn't there?'

The nodding became more enthusiastic. She smiled back. Well, there was a thing. Father Hegarty, saintly man that he was, was leaving no stone unturned in preparation for his sister's visit - and leaving the eejit Michael in charge of the stones. With exaggerated care she turned the key in the ignition and signalled Michael to do the same. The Volvo roared into life, then spluttered, coughed and died. Bernadette sighed. The boy wasn't even able to drive the car to buy the paint. She gripped her steering wheel tightly and prayed for patience.

This was going to be a long job.