

The Hunt for Black Friday

Chapter 1

IT WAS SEVEN thirty on a crisp spring morning when the red London Transport double decker bus pulled up at the stop just opposite the already busy Starbucks coffee shop on King Street in the south of the capital.

Teenager Martin McConaghy stepped to one side to allow a mother and her two young children climb on board; he was in no rush and he didn't care where he managed to find a seat. He wondered if others could see the terror in his eyes, or that he had wet his pants.

He smiled nervously at the driver as he flashed his school bus pass before making his way down the length of the coach to the rear seat, his school bag heavy on his shoulder.

As the bus pulled away he stared out of the window and wondered what was happening back home.

His Mum and Dad had been getting dressed and he had been fast asleep when two masked gunmen forced their way into the ground floor apartment and ordered everyone into the kitchen. He had never seen such fear in his parents' faces.

The gunmen had demanded his school bag and he fetched it from his bedroom and watched as they dumped his books and pencils on to the kitchen floor before ordering him to get dressed and be ready to leave.

"You want to see your Ma and Da here alive again, you do as we say," the man with the Irish accent and ginger hair had growled as he handed the bag back to him when he reappeared in his school uniform. All he could do was nod as he grabbed hold of the bag. It was heavy, but he hadn't complained.

Martin's Mum and Dad had looked on as he had struggled to position the bag over his shoulder before heading out the door. On the pavement outside, another man had sidled up to him and flashed a smile that was full of menace.

"I'll walk you to the stop, Martin," was all he had said.

Now, as he sat on the bus staring out the window so that others couldn't see the tears in his eyes, he wondered what was in his school bag; he wanted to take a look but couldn't bring himself to do so. Not yet, and for a moment he thought he should stop the bus and run back home, but fear soon swallowed up the desire to do so.

This was turning out to be the worst day of his life, and it had only just begun.

She had been young and beautiful once. She'd had her whole life ahead of her until they took it all away in an instant.

She always thought she could have been anybody she had wanted to be – until that awful afternoon when her daydreams had turned into nightmares.

Her parents were never rich, but they knew how to make ends meet; more than that, they could stretch their finances way beyond what others would have thought possible, and out of all the family, she had been the one to benefit most, with an education that took her to degree level at Trinity College in Dublin.

Her prospects were better than good and she had considered pursuing a career in the financial or property sectors, though during any free time she had been trained by the very best in drama and the theatre, so, yes, abundant opportunities had come her way and that's what she had been pondering until that fateful day that sent her spiralling into a very dark place.

She had even considered turning her back on her strict Catholic upbringing for a glitzy and glamorous life in London, for what had religion ever done for her? Indeed, in some ways, she had reasoned afterwards, it was her religion that had attracted them to her in the first place. That and the politics of the time.

The desire for achievement and success had long been extinguished. The years rolled by, taking their heavy toll and had brought her to this place where she called home.

It certainly wasn't a palace, but it wasn't a hovel, either, and while she wasn't afraid of anything anymore – except losing the job that would help her reach her only remaining goal in life – she was shivering as she contemplated the future.

Yes, they would pay, and pay dearly for what they had done all those years ago, and she would go to her grave a happy and satisfied soul.

It wouldn't be long now. Everything was almost in place.

It was what she wanted to do, and he hadn't tried that hard to talk her out of it because he could see the determination and resolve in her eyes. Now it was too late.

The wheels had been set in motion.

As she sat looking out of her apartment window, she recalled her conversation earlier in the day with her consultant. He had bad news, but nothing that she didn't already know about; he was more upset than she.

"It's inoperable. I'm very sorry," the consultant had told her, his head bowed behind his cluttered desk. "Do you have any family?"

"No not really. Why?" she had asked, digesting the news.

"You don't have very long," he had replied. "Maybe three months."

She remembered smiling and glancing across to a desk calendar, then to the wall clock.

"Oh, it will be considerably less," she had said.

The consultant had been clearly taken aback.

"How can you be so certain?"

"I've never been more certain in my life. I'll be off now; lots to do and so little time. Good day."

The consultant had watched in silence as she had vacated the room. He had always thought her a strange lady and he had felt the urge to call someone, but then dismissed the idea. What would he have told them?

Impending death had strange effects on people. Still, she frightened the hell out of him and he would remember this day with a sack full of regrets for the rest of his life.

He had been born with a burning hatred in his heart and lived a cold and loveless life until he had found a reason to exist.

The long journey down the M6 gave him plenty of time to reflect on the past, but it was difficult to make any sense of it. He remembered his childhood beginning with his first fight in the playground; he hadn't fared well, suffering two black eyes and a sprained wrist, but surprisingly no beating for which he had been prepared when he went home to his parents.

When the Brits had first rolled into his village in their armoured trucks he stood alone to confront them, a rock in one hand and an empty milk bottle in the other, until his mother came racing out of the house to gather him up in her arms and rush him back indoors.

It was a memory that stood out as if it had happened only yesterday. He could smile at it now. It had been his first step to the place where he was today; it was the day his life took on meaning.

He dismissed the thought as he pulled into a service station for a pee and a pint, immediately running into a group of uniformed soldiers emerging from the café to board a mini-bus. He shuddered slightly as they brushed passed him. He didn't make eye contact with any of them. They were the enemy.

Martin's father Bill was plucking up the courage to confront his fears. How dare these men burst into his home? How dare they order his son around like they did? How dare they?

He looked across at his terrified wife and tried to comfort her with a smile.

The ginger haired gunman had his back to them; he was staring out the window, watching Martin disappear around the corner at the end of the street. Bill glanced at the other gunman who was fiddling with the gas cooker.

"What are you going to do with my son?" he asked, finally steeling himself to confront the intruders.

The gunman with the dirty fair hair stepped forward and levelled his hand gun at Bill.

"You got a death wish?" he growled.

Bill's wife took a deep breath and moved closer to her husband, her eyes not leaving the gunman's.

"Stay calm, love," she whispered, reaching out for his hand.

"Listen to your old woman," said Ginger Hair. "Good advice."

"I still want to know what's going to happen to our son," demanded Bill, wrapping a comforting arm around Yvonne.

Fair Hair didn't reply. Instead he stepped up to Bill and raised his gun. Yvonne's scream was drowned out by a loud crack. The impact of the bullet knocked Bill off his feet. It struck him between the eyes and he died before he hit the ground.

Yvonne rushed forward to her husband's side. She didn't hear the sound of the second bullet that entered the back of her head.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," said Ginger Hair, as she collapsed on to the body of her husband.

"Not yet," replied Fair Hair, throwing a switch on the gas cooker, before plugging in a toaster on the kitchen worktop. "Remember: no evidence."

They were halfway down the street when the explosion ripped through the apartment, causing the upper floors to collapse. All that remained was a smouldering pile of rubble.