

HOLDING

Also by Graham Norton

So Me
The Life and Loves of a He Devil

HOLDING

Graham Norton

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HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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For Rhoda – finally one you can read!

Part One

1

It was widely accepted by the residents of Duneen that, should a crime be committed and Sergeant Collins managed to apprehend the culprit, it would be very unlikely that the arrest had involved a pursuit on foot. People liked him well enough, and there was no name-calling as such, but it was still quite unsettling for the village that their safety depended on a man who broke into a sweat walking up for communion.

This particular morning, however, nobody seemed overly concerned. Main Street, being the only street, contained most of the action. The village was still waiting for winter to arrive, and yet Susan Hickey looked like she was preparing for an Arctic expedition. She was huddled over awkwardly with a wire brush, trying to remove a few patches of rust from her gate. She was also keeping a silent tally of the wine bottles Brid Riordan was

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placing carefully into the recycling. Sixteen! Had the woman no shame? On the other side of the street, outside the pub, Cormac Byrne coughed up a very satisfying lump of phlegm and dispatched it through the air to land in the gutter. Over by the phone box, the dusty black and white collie dog that belonged to the Lyons from the garage looked up, satisfied himself that everything was as uninteresting as he had assumed and put his head back down between his paws.

Outside O'Driscoll's shop, post office and café, the Garda car, sitting low over its tyres, gave the impression of having been there for some time. In the driver's seat, with his stomach wedged against the steering wheel, sat Sergeant Patrick James Collins. The names had been chosen because his mother's father Patrick had died just six weeks before her son was born, and because his mother was a big fan of James Garner, the actor that starred in *The Rockford Files*. His father had provided the surname. In retrospect, the care put into his christening was misplaced, since everyone simply knew him as PJ.

PJ Collins had not always been fat. On long summer evenings he had played with the other children in the lane at the back of his parents' shop in Limerick. Kick the can, hide-and-seek, what time is it, Mr Fox? The high-pitched laughter, accusations of cheating and occasional crying filled the still air of dusk until the clang of a colander or the sizzle of frying onions called them in for their dinner. He missed that feeling of just being one of the gang. He could hardly remember what it felt like not to be

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noticed or judged. Puberty had brought with it a combination of appetite and inertia that led to a thickening of the skin and the end of his days as one of the lads. He hadn't needed his mother's nagging to see what was happening, but somehow, despite constant private vows to get his weight under control, he just got bigger and bigger, until by the time he left school, he felt the task of slimming down was beyond him.

Looking back, he could see that he had hidden behind his size and used it as an excuse so he didn't have to compete in all the trials of adolescence. No need to summon up the courage to ask a girl out on a date, because which of the Margarets or Fionas with their long pale necks and shiny hair would want his warm clammy hands holding them on the dance floor? The other boys tried to outdo each other with fancy leather-soled shoes or bright stickers on their bikes, but PJ knew that no matter what he did, he could never be cool. Being overweight hadn't made him happy necessarily, but it had helped him avoid a great deal of heartache. It got him off the hook.

Life as a guard suited PJ. The uniform and the car didn't make him feel any more alien than he always had, and keeping a strict professional distance between himself and the neighbours he had to police was no great challenge for him. He stared out of the window at the long, slow hill that led the tourists' cars on towards the coast and the beauty they had been promised. People didn't stop in Duneen. In defence of the casual traveller, there was little reason why they should. There was nothing to

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make the village stand out from any other. Wedged into a gentle green valley, jagged terraces of two- and three-storey buildings lined the road, painted long ago in the sort of pastel colours usually associated with baby clothes. At the bottom of Main Street there was an old bridge across the River Torne. Beyond that, the solid grey chapel kept watch on a small hill. No one living could recall a time when it had ever looked any different. Time didn't pass in Duneen; it seeped away.

PJ dabbed a damp finger on the toast crumbs in his lap, brought it to his mouth and sighed. Just gone eleven. A good hour and a half till lunch. What day was it? Wednesday. Pork chops. He supposed they'd have the leftover crumble from last night, but then he remembered he had finished that standing in front of the tall fridge just before he went to bed. He blushed slightly as he thought of Mrs Meany, the housekeeper, finding the bowl in the sink. Tutting as she washed it under the hot water while at the same time planning what new confection she could conjure up to tempt him with. He swore that if it weren't for her he'd be half the size. Sure, a sandwich would do him for his lunch. He didn't need two dinners or, come to that, two puddings. He only had the cooked breakfast every morning because she plopped it down in front of him before he could protest. His arm twitched as he imagined slamming the fridge door against her small frame and letting her slump to the floor, no longer able to widen her eyes as she cleared his plate: 'Well, no need to ask if you enjoyed that, Sergeant!'

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A knock on the car window interrupted his violent reverie. It was Mrs O'Driscoll herself from the shop. Normally it would be the daughter, Mairead, or the skinny Polish girl whose name he couldn't remember but was too embarrassed to ask again. He turned the key, held the window button down and cleared his throat. He hadn't spoken since he said goodbye to Mrs Meany at a quarter to nine.

'Nice enough again.'

'It is, thanks be to God. I brought you a cup of tea there, to save you getting out.'

Mrs O'Driscoll bared her small neat teeth and laughed. She was being kind, and yet all PJ heard was a woman laughing at a man his size squeezed into the driver's seat and revelling in her own slim figure. She held out the cup and saucer with its cloud of steam. Then her other arm shot out, thrusting a plate with a jam-covered scone up to his face.

'They're just out of the oven, and that's the jam from the rector's wife.'

'You're too good to me,' he said with a forced smile. Who knew a simple scone could provoke such a confusion of emotions? He felt patronised, angry, greedy, hungry and defeated all at the same time.

'Enjoy that now, and don't worry, I'll send Petra out in a minute for the plate. Sure you'll make short work of it!' Another laugh and she scuttled across the footpath back into the shop.

PJ placed the cup and saucer on the passenger seat and picked

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up the scone. He forced himself to finish it in two bites rather than one and licked the smears of jam from the corners of his mouth. Plate down, saucer up, he took a slurp of tea. On the radio the presenter was asking movie trivia questions. Name the original *Ghostbusters*. Well, that's not a hard one. Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and . . . who was that other one? He shut his eyes to imagine the face of the actor but instead conjured up the grinning face of Emma Fitzmaurice. *Ghostbusters* had been their date. He felt the heat of embarrassment course through his body as if it were yesterday. His awkward attempt to angle himself in the small cinema seat so that he could try and put his arm behind her shoulders. The way she looked at him and laughed. No attempt to spare his feelings, just sheer derision. Why had she agreed to come with him? No matter how awkward or humiliating the 'no' might have been, it would have been better than staring straight ahead at the screen trying not to cry while her shoulders shook beside him. He had never made that mistake again.

Another knock at the window. He turned expecting to see . . . what the hell was her name? . . . but instead saw a face he didn't recognise: a tall man in his late forties with weathered skin and a head shaved to mask the baldness that had come all too soon. He wore a bright yellow hi-vis jacket and carried a hard hat under his arm. PJ assumed he must be working on the new housing development up behind the primary school. The window slid down.

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‘Guard. The foreman sent me down to get you. We’re after finding something up above.’ The builder waved his hand in the general direction of the school.

This was a good feeling. He was needed. After an unhurried sip of tea, PJ looked up and asked, ‘What sort of thing?’

The investigation had begun.

‘It might be nothing. Some of the lads said work on, but myself and the foreman thought somebody better have a look.’

‘Right so, I’ll head on up. Will you sit in with me?’

‘Oh thanks. I will so.’

PJ remembered he was holding the cup and saucer, and of course there was the plate as well. This was awkward. It was not the slick sort of modern policeman he wanted to be. He hesitated for a moment and then reminded himself that he was a sergeant and this a mere labourer. He held out the crockery.

‘Would you run those back into the shop there for me like a good man?’

The builder didn’t move. Was he going to say no? Was he simple? But then without speaking he took the items and headed into the shop, before returning and climbing into the passenger seat. Once inside the car, he seemed much larger than he had on the street. Their shoulders touched. As Sergeant Collins started the engine and put the car into reverse, he placed his hand behind the other seat so he could get a better look out the back window. The awkward manoeuvre, the physical proximity of another warm body: all at once he was back in the

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darkness of the cinema with Emma but this time, he thought, nobody was laughing.

The car rolled backwards with a satisfying crunch of gravel, and then with a smooth change of gear moved quickly across the road and headed up the hill to the east of the village, past the school, towards what had once been the Burkes' farm. Both Susan Hickey and the collie looked up as the Garda car vanished, leaving a cloud of ancient dust. Sergeant Collins let out an involuntary grunt. For some reason he felt good. He felt like a winner.

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Before the soft growl of the Garda car's engine had died away, the door of O'Driscoll's shop opened and Evelyn Ross stepped into the street. With her bright red woollen coat, wicker basket and dark blue beret, she looked out of place on Duneen's main street. Tall, with chestnut hair and the sort of fine features that meant her age was very hard to guess – fortyish? – this was a woman who organised tennis parties in the Hamptons, or served trays of mulled wine to riders before the hunt, not a woman who trudged past the phone box and the garage with nothing in her basket but a small bag of oat flakes and a copy of that week's *Southern Star*. She picked her way carefully across the short stretch of uneven pavement and unbuttoned her coat. So mild for late November. The collie followed her for a few yards but then peeled off on to the garage forecourt and home. Susan Hickey didn't even look up.

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In the village and surrounding parishes Evelyn was what might be called 'well known'. Not famous, exactly, but everyone knew who she was and if they didn't they'd soon be told. She was one of the Ross girls from Ard Carraig. There were three of them: Abigail, Florence and the youngest, Evelyn. All unmarried, they lived together in the large stone-fronted family home about a mile outside the village.

Their parents had been the wealthiest people in the area, with a prosperous farm and vague talk of investments. Robert Ross had provided the land while his bride Rosemary, being the only daughter of a bank manager in Cork city, had the shares. Everyone worried about how the little girl from the big city would cope on the farm, but she had in fact blossomed. Soon there was hardly a committee or a board that didn't boast Rosemary Ross as a member.

The young couple had been delighted when their first daughter Abigail had been born, but even though they never spoke of such things, that joy had turned to a palpable sense of disappointment by the time a third baby girl had arrived. It felt unjust. Where was their son? After Evelyn there were two miscarriages and then nothing. Robert began to feel that his desire for Rosemary and a son was causing his wife harm. The full wet kisses became chaste lips barely touching after he turned the light off. Two people lying in the dark full of love but both thinking they had failed the other. Some marriages combust, others die, and some just lie down like a wounded animal, defeated.

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Strangely, it was the cancer that brought the marriage back to life. In Rosemary's final months, she and Robert found their love did still exist; it had just been buried beneath layers of misunderstanding and missed opportunities, waiting to be unearthed like those perfectly preserved bodies found in bogs. Of course the feelings remained unspoken, but every unasked-for cup of tea, too milky or too strong, every dripping saucer placed by rough dark fingers on her bedside table beside her rosary beads told her that he still loved her. And in those dark endless hours before dawn when she allowed him to hold her thin bony frame as she wept, he understood that she still loved him.

Evelyn's first day back at school after her mother's funeral had been hard. Most of the girls avoided her, unsure of what to say or how to act, and the couple that didn't just wanted to know if she'd seen the body. It was a relief to reach the gates of Ard Carraig, and as she trudged down the tree-lined driveway towards home, her schoolbag heavy on her back, she allowed herself to cry. She had remained dry-eyed all day and she knew her mother would have been proud of her, but now as she looked at the dark windows ahead, it was all too much. Everything seemed grey and bleak and would for evermore because her mammy was gone.

As she went around the back of the house into the yard, she could feel the chill of the wind drying her wet cheeks. Her footsteps slowed as she tried to delay facing the cold, gloomy kitchen. No radio. No baking filling the air as it cooled on a

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wire tray. She had reached the back door when she noticed a light coming from the workshop in the far corner. Over the years, she would often retrace this short journey and examine every detail. The dozen paces across the greasy cobbles, her small hand pushing open the heavy wooden door with its flaking paint, the shadow on the floor moving slowly from side to side, the work boots with dirty soles and one lace untied, the hands that had patted her on the head that very morning, now hanging limply. The creaking of the rope. That was where her memories ended. She could never see his face. The face of her father who couldn't face a world that didn't have his Rosemary in it.

To begin with, nobody was quite sure what would become of the three Ross girls. Women from the village had come to the house to help with meals and various men had assisted with funeral arrangements, but it soon became clear that they were neither needed nor welcome. The eldest girl, Abigail, took charge in a way that almost suggested that she had been waiting for this very circumstance. She arranged to rent the land to a local farmer, and that money meant Florence was able to go away to teacher training college. Evelyn, though the youngest, ran the house, doing the majority of the cleaning and cooking. She had imagined that this arrangement would come to an end at some point, but somehow she never found a time when it felt right to abandon Abigail; and then, when Florence came back to Duneen to teach in the local school, it seemed that they were

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simply meant to stay together, bound by sadness and their big house that had forgotten every happy memory it had once contained.

Twenty-six years later, though, as she walked down the same avenue with her wicker basket, Evelyn Ross was not thinking about the past. Abigail's ladies were coming for bridge after dinner and Evelyn was planning what supper she would wheel through on the trolley with the tea. She thought she might use the good china with the yellow roses. Was that a bit over the top? Would Abigail roll her eyes? Evelyn decided that she didn't care. It was pretty, and anyway, what were they saving it for? What occasion at Ard Carraig would ever be special enough to truly warrant its use?

Once inside the house, she hung her coat on the rack by the freezer, turned on the radio and started to get lunch ready. She glanced at the clock: 12.15. Florence would be home from school soon and she was always in a rush. The soup was steaming on the hob and the slices of soda bread were fanned out on a plate when she heard the familiar *ting* of the bicycle bell as Florence threw her bike against the wall outside the back door and rushed in with a blast of cold air.

Of the three sisters, Florence was considered the prettiest. She kept her light brown hair shoulder length and swept to one side. Evelyn envied her 'curves', as the magazines called them, though Florence never dressed to make the most of them: the kilts and thick knits that made up most of her wardrobe always

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gave her the slight air of a head girl. She seemed more out of breath than usual. Evelyn sensed at once that she had news.

‘Great excitement!’

‘What is it?’

‘Well, I was just finishing geography when the Garda car went flying by.’

Florence put her anorak on the back of a chair and sat down. She picked at a piece of the bread and paused for effect.

‘And?’

‘I thought nothing of it, but when I was leaving just now, I could see it parked up at the new development. I didn’t want to look too nosy so I didn’t cycle up, but then as I came through the village I saw a couple of the builders outside the shop, so I stopped and asked what was going on. You’ll never guess!’

‘You’re right, I won’t,’ Evelyn said as she took two soup bowls down from the dresser. They had played this game before.

‘Something was found when they were digging out the foundations, and they think it’s a body!’

The soup bowls hit the floor with a crash, the pieces scattering into every corner of the room.