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The Devil's Due: An Historical Thriller

Excerpt

Preface

In 1919, after seven hundred years of British oppression, a slumbering rage awakened as the Irish people rose up to claim their freedom and their land. Poorly trained, vastly outnumbered and severely short on guns and ammunition, a relatively small force nonetheless brought the battle to British forces in cities like Dublin and Limerick and Cork and on the lonely roads and fields in between. As the fighting raged, Frank Kelleher and Kathleen Coffey—a young couple from Limerick with plans for the future—were torn apart. This is Frank's tale: his fall from grace, his dreams and his quest for redemption.

If you are interested in learning more of the historical context for the story, please see the Author's Note in the back of the book. I've also provided several maps to help the reader get a better sense of time and place as well as a Historical Cheat Sheet to fill in some of the blanks.

I hope you enjoy the pages that follow.

Chapter One

County Limerick, Ireland
December 1920

It was such an odd thought for a man about to die, but, still, it filled my head. *Will I hear the gun? Will I feel the bullet?* I stared at the floor of the barn, the dirt soaked with my own blood. The earth was cold against my cheek, and I could hear the pitter-patter of rain on the roof. *God pissin' on us again. Only in Ireland.* The light of the oil lamps danced a waltz across the wall and, in the flickering light, I saw a pair of boots, then trousers. Nothing more, but I knew it was Billy. One of my eyes was already swollen shut, and I couldn't lift my head from the dirt to see the rest of him. I didn't have to; those were Billy's boots.

"Fuckin' traitor!"

I raised my hand, as if that would stop him, but still the boot slammed into my ribs. I heard a cry, no longer sure if it was me lying on the ground or if I was a spectator watching some poor soul being beaten. Choking, I spit out more blood and tried to catch my breath, but the boot came again. Through one eye, I saw the feet, the legs, dancing with the light, then the flash of Billy's boot striking me in the chest, the stomach, the arms. I heard the thuds, felt my body jump, each kick like a bolt of lightning, agonizing bolts of pain coursing through my body. Unseen hands began to pull me down into the darkness. Yet still I wondered. *Will I hear the gun? Will I feel it? Probably not,* I thought. *A bright flash then, what? Nothing? Blackness?* I sighed and waited for the bullet, wondering how I would know when it finally came.

There would be no Jesus waiting for me on the other side, that was for sure. No Mary, no saints, no choir of angels. Good Irish Catholic lad that I was, I had done enough in my short life to know that heaven wasn't in the cards. Not for me, anyway. My head exploded in a flash of colors, and the darkness beckoned me. *Probably just the darkness,* I decided. Maybe that wasn't so bad.

It was strange, but I wasn't afraid anymore. Not of death, certainly. Billy had beaten that out of me. I wasn't afraid of hell either. Despite all that I had done—and what happened two days ago was sure to seal my fate—I wasn't sure I believed in the Church's view of hell. Seven hundred years of oppression under the British was hell enough. Eternal damnation, I suspected, was in the here and now, in the pains

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and tragedies of everyday life. And, surely, I was in pain. Billy had seen to that. Pain and regret were all I felt now.

I suppose any man about to die has regrets, and I had my share. A sudden sadness overwhelmed me. I would never see Kathleen again.

I don't know how long I lay there with Billy kicking me, cursing me, calling me a spy, a traitor. It didn't matter what I said; he would never believe me. At some point I stopped feeling the kicks, stopped feeling the pain, and surrendered to the darkness. Maybe I was already dead and didn't know it.

Then from the shadows, I felt a hand on my face, surprisingly gentle, brushing the hair out of my eyes. *Kathleen?* Then a hiss.

"Oh Jesus, Frank! What has he done to you?"

Liam?

Hands grabbed me below the arms and lifted me up. I heard a grunt, then a curse—Liam's voice. My head spinning, I tried to stand but couldn't. It took a moment to realize that my hands and feet were still strapped to the chair. I felt something pulling then pushing, hands on my sides again—Liam? A jolt of pain shot through me. Shaking with spasms, I hissed and coughed up more blood. Surely, I thought, I had a few broken ribs thanks to Billy's boot. I squinted through the tears and blood; there was Liam, his own eyes wet. What was he doing here? Had they sent him—my closest friend—to put the bullet in me?

My head hung limp, then I felt Liam's gentle hands on my chin. Through one eye, I watched as he dipped the cloth in the pail and began to wipe my face. I gasped when he got to my nose. Liam pulled the cloth away, stared at it for a second, his own face a grimace. In the flickering light, the cloth was dark red, stained by my own blood. Liam shook his head and dropped it in the pail.

"Do you want some water, Frank?"

Not waiting for an answer, he held the cup to my cracked and swollen lips. I coughed again and most of the water ran down my neck to join the blood on my shirt. The little I drank tasted of copper.

"Jesus, Liam," I hissed. "Is it a bath you're giving me or a drink?"

Liam just shook his head.

"I thought you were one of us, Frank."

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I coughed again and squinted through the pain. "I am, Liam." I coughed once more, my voice hoarse. "I am."

He shook his head again, and I could see the pain in his eyes.

"That's not what they're saying, Frank. Three of our boys dead..." His voice trailed off, his eyes telling me what he couldn't say. *How could you do it, Frank?*

"And now the British have our names," he continued, choking on the words. He sighed and wiped his eyes. "They'll hunt us down. Is that what you want?" His eyes pleaded with me, and I knew what he wanted to say but couldn't. *Do you want to see me with a bullet in my head too, Frank?*

"Liam..." I coughed again—a spasm—bright, hot pain slicing through me.

He shook his head sadly. "You were one of us, Frank." There was a hurt in his eyes that matched my own. *How could you betray me?* his eyes seemed to ask. He sighed, dipped the cloth in the pail, then wiped my nose again. "I thought you were one of us..."

"Liam..."

He leaned close and whispered in my ear. "For the love of God, Frank! He's going to kill you anyway. You know that. Why don't you tell him what he wants?" He sniffed then turned away and wiped his eyes. "I can't watch this anymore."

"I didn't do it, Liam."

He stared at me for a moment then leaned close again. "Ah, Jesus, Frank. Don't you see? It doesn't matter. You know that. If they suspect you're an informant, you're an informant."

He was right, but still I protested.

"I swear on my father's grave, I didn't do it, Liam."

"But you're the only one still alive."

A small doubt, but his eyes, like his words, told me it was hopeless. If Liam didn't believe me, Billy and the others surely wouldn't. And why should they? It was supposed to be a simple operation. But something had gone wrong—terribly wrong—and now here I was, waiting for the bullet. Better that it would be coming from one of my own than from the fuckin' British. For some reason, that made me feel better.

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"I know, Liam," I wheezed. "I know. But I didn't do it."

Liam shook his head, unsure what to do.

"Did you write your letter?" he finally asked, choking on the words.

My letter. My last chance to speak to Kathleen, to tell her in my own words what had happened. Billy hadn't given me the chance, though.

"Just tell Kathleen I love her." I looked up into my friend's eyes. "You'll do that for me won't you, Liam?"

He nodded slowly. "Aye." He paused, his eyes telling me there was more. "And your mam?"

My mam. What could I say to a woman I hadn't spoken to in three years. Would she even care?

Suddenly, there were shouts from outside, and I flinched at the sharp crack of a rifle. This was followed by two more, then shouting again. *What was happening?* I tried to piece it together. I knew what it was, I told myself, but the answer seemed to be lost in the clouds in my head. I stared up at Liam. Before I could ask, the clatter of a machine gun filled the air.

"Oh, Jesus!" Liam screamed. "It's the Tans!"

The clouds suddenly vanished. *The Black and Tans!* The fear came flooding back, and I forgot about the pain of Billy's boot. For the last year, the scourge of the British army, wearing their mismatched uniforms, had sacked and looted our towns and terrorized our people. Ex-servicemen, soldiers who had seen time on the Western front—and many who had seen the inside of a British jail—they had been sent to supplement the ranks of the Peelers, the Royal Irish Constabulary. These were war-hardened men, more than one of whom had been languishing in prison for one crime or another. And now, Britain had cleaned out their jails and sent their criminals to be our police. In April, they had gone on a rampage in Limerick; in December, they'd burnt the city of Cork.

"Liam!" I pleaded.

Before he could answer, bullets tore through the windows of the barn, chipping stone, ripping into the wood. The cows and sheep screeched, slamming into the cart and threatening to finish what Billy had started. I saw the flash above, heard the tinkle, shards of glass raining down on me. Seconds later the hay was on fire. One of the oil lamps had been hit, I realized. Liam slammed into me, and I howled in pain when I landed back on the blood-soaked dirt. He was screaming as he clawed at the ropes that bound my hands. The fire raged as chips and splinters flew. Soon the sparks hit the ceiling and the thatch began to smolder, the sheep and cows shrieking all the while.

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“Come on, Frank!” Liam screamed as he struggled with the ropes that held me.

I felt his arms pulling, dragging me through the dirt to the cow door in the back. He kicked it open, peeked outside, then pulled me through.

"For fuck's sake, Frank! I'll not be dragging you the whole way! Get up! Run!"

I struggled to my feet, the emotion and adrenaline masking the pain. I limped after Liam across the field, scrambled over the stone wall, falling once and crying out in pain. But somehow, I got up and kept going. Behind me, the guns went silent, but the screech of the animals, the shouts and the sounds of motorcars carried across the fields. I lost sight of Liam, knowing he'd done his part in setting me free. I was on my own.

I stumbled but kept running, unsure where to go, just wanting to get away. But I couldn't run all night, not with broken ribs and the life nearly beat out of me.

As the sounds died behind me, I stopped for a moment to catch my breath. Hands on my knees, I looked back across the field, expecting to see British soldiers, or worse, Billy. But in the darkness I saw nothing. I turned again then hesitated. As I debated what to do, where I could hide, I realized there was one thing I had to do first.

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I crept along the alley, careful to stay in the shadows. Then a *putt putt*, and I froze as the sound of a motorcar echoed off the walls. In a panic, I ducked behind the rubbish bins as the noise grew louder. For a moment, I was sure the lorry would turn into the alley, but then the motor began to fade as the lorry passed by. The city was worse than the countryside. Every sound startled me—every scrape of a foot, every bang of a door, every clomp of a horse's hoof on stone. The curfew meant that the only people who should be out were the British. That thought sent a shiver up my spine. Just the British and me.

I snuck around to the back of the house and, as I passed the darkened window of the scullery, I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass. In the faint glow from the gas lamp in the alley behind me, I could see the damage Billy had done: one eye dark behind a puffy slit, the other anxious, scared. My cheeks and lips were swollen, and blood still oozed from my broken nose. Other than that, my face was mostly clean; thanks to the cold water from the stream I had stopped at an hour before. My trousers were still damp and my boots sloshed from the crossing, but so far I had managed to avoid capture.

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The chute was open, thank God, and I swallowed a groan as I crawled through the trap door into the coal store. *Big Frankie*, the boys called me, with a laugh. But I could fit in places most men couldn't. On my hands and knees, I waited several moments, listening for noises in the house, but all I heard was the occasional creak and groan. The banshee and the ghosts I could deal with; it was the living that frightened me. Thankfully, the house was quiet. I brushed the coal dust off as best I could then crept upstairs. The stairway protested under my weight, but no one seemed to notice. It was plain luck—I was too cynical to believe that Jesus and Mary were watching over me. Kathleen's room was on the third floor, in the servant's wing. The lock took but a moment, and then I was inside.

I know I gave her a fright, placing my hand over her mouth, whispering into her ear, but it couldn't be avoided. It took her several moments to calm down. Then a sly smile.

"If it's the bed you're after, Frank, you shouldn't have come. I have work tomorrow."

Good Catholic girl that she was, she hadn't seen me for two weeks. I shook my head.

"Nay, Kathleen. I'm not here for that."

She smiled wickedly until she saw past the coal dust. She gasped.

"Jesus, Frank! What have you been in to?"

I winced when she touched my cheek. I took her hand.

"I need to go away for a while, Kathleen."

First confusion, then fear, then a scowl, her eyes dark, her face cross.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

"It doesn't matter, Kathleen. But I have to go. Now. Before they find me." I paused as I searched her eyes. "I'll be back, I promise."

"How long?" she asked with a worried frown.

Not sure what to tell her, I shook my head.

After a moment, I could see the resignation in her eyes. She nodded slowly. "Where will you go?"

I shook my head again. "I don't know."

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She was quiet for a moment, waiting for more, expecting me to tell her that I had a plan, to tell her that everything would be all right. When all I could give her was silence, she frowned and shook her head.

"What about Liam? He'll help you," she protested. "And the lads? They'll see you're taken care of?"

The lads. The IRA. They had hidden many a man on the run from the British.

I sighed. Before I could answer, there was a shout outside and we both turned to the window. After a moment, I heard the quiet singing, the sounds of drunken men on their way home from the pub, one that should have closed hours ago. I shook my head; it was a dangerous game they were playing, breaking the curfew. But who was I to talk? I turned back to Kathleen and shook my head again.

"Nay," I answered. I took a breath and forced myself to say it. "They're the ones after me." It was a lot for her to digest—it was a lot for me to digest—and the early hour didn't help. "I'm on my own."

Kathleen gasped, her breath catching in her throat, then she looked away. Her shoulders slumped, and she leaned forward, her face in her hands. I waited for tears that never came. When she looked up, there was something else in her eyes; the fear I expected, but there was a sadness too.

"Frank," she began slowly. She held my gaze for a moment, then turned her head and stared at some unseen spot on the floor. She pulled a chain from the collar of her gown and absentmindedly rubbed the medal between her fingers.

It was a foolish thing to do and I knew it before the words came out of my mouth.

I reached for her hands. "You have to come with me."

Kathleen looked up and dropped the medal. She frowned. "What?" she demanded, her voice rising. "Have you lost your mind?"

I nearly had to clamp my hand over her mouth again but, thankfully, she stopped. I waited, knowing she wasn't done.

"How can I leave?" she whispered, then nodded toward the door. "What about them?"

A domestic servant she was called, one of six girls who kept house for a rich Protestant family. Her days were spent scrubbing yesterday's dirt from the tile floors and polishing the dark wood moldings that filled the house. She washed and mended the linens, cleaned out the fires, and restocked the coal. At four, after she brought Mrs. Cavanagh her afternoon tea, in a china cup served on a silver platter kept polished as the missus demanded, she put the baby in the pram and took the three children for a walk.

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"Kathleen." My whisper was urgent. "You know what will happen if you stay."

It was only a matter of time before Liam told the boys about Kathleen. He was my friend after all, and Billy would come for him next. I didn't think Billy would do anything to Kathleen—what could he do, her sister being Mary and all?—but I didn't tell her that. I couldn't stay in Limerick, but I didn't want to leave Kathleen behind.

There was a thump in the house. She gasped, and I had to clamp her mouth again. A door squeaked, then loud footsteps right outside the room. A second later, the creak of the stairs.

Kathleen pulled my hand away and leaned close, her lips touching my ear.

"It's Eileen," she whispered, "going to the privy."

I stared at the door and listened to the footsteps fade. A moment later, there was the far-off clunk of the privy door shutting outside. I turned back to Kathleen and, in the dim light, I could see her face was clouded with doubt.

"Come with me," I said softly.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I can't."

"Why not?" I asked as I searched her eyes. I nodded toward the door. "They mean nothing to you."

"I can't," she said again. She hesitated, looking away for a moment, before her eyes found mine once more. "I can't."

Before I could say anything more, her eyes narrowed. "And where would we go?" she demanded. "With the IRA after you." She continued to scowl. "And likely the British too."

"I don't know. Tipperary? Tralee? Dublin? What does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" she repeated as if I were daft.

She was about to say more but stopped as the sound of a motor drifted across the darkness. I glanced at the window. The sound grew, the motor whining. Soon it became a roar. My heart quickened as I reached for the drapes. I froze at the squeal of the brakes. Doors banged open and the night was filled with voices. British voices.

"Go!" Kathleen hissed in my ear.

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I turned back. Her eyes were filled with panic. She gripped my hands.

"Now! Before they find you."

I held her gaze for a moment—her eyes pleading with me—before I nodded. I leaned forward and kissed her gently on the forehead. I turned and rose, then felt her hand on mine once more.

"Go," she said softly, nodding toward the door, all the while still holding my hand.

There were shouts from below the window, then the sounds of running feet. She dropped my hand and nodded toward the door once more.

"Go."

Silently, I made my way to the door.

It was a foolish thing to do; it was better to get the parting over with. But I couldn't help myself, and I glanced back once more before I slipped outside.

Kathleen had pulled her knees up to her chest, the linens draped over. She was biting her lip and staring at something—nothing—on the floor between us. She pulled the medal from her gown again, and I watched as she turned it over and over in her hands.

She looked up once, shook her head as a tear slid down her cheek. *Go*, she mouthed.

I felt a lump in my throat as I quietly stepped outside.

I managed to sneak out of the Cavanaghs' without disturbing the family or the other servants, or worse, drawing the attention of the British patrol. The fog was thick, and I was thankful for that as I made my way down the alley. Still, I hid in the shadows, afraid not only of the Peelers and the IRA but wary of the gypsies and gangs that would surely try to beat and rob me given the chance. As I approached the street, the murmurs of voices and the bang of a hammer caught my attention. Heart thumping in my chest, I slipped back into the alley. After a moment, I peered around the corner and, in the glow of the gas lamp, spied the green uniforms of the Peelers. A constable was standing in front of the telegraph pole, a hammer in his hand. One more stood behind him, his rifle held ready. Three more plus a driver sat in a lorry. They were hanging another notice; more orders, no doubt, more new laws from London designed to put us back into our place. The aristocracy in London was looking to squash the latest insurrection as they had all the ones for centuries before, all the while trying to appease us ignorant

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peasants with promises of Home Rule someday. I hid in the alley waiting for them to finish, my heart thumping in my chest all the while.

It was but a moment later that they were done. With a growl from its engine and a grinding of its gears, the lorry disappeared into the mist. I slipped out of the alley and made my way to the pole.

One thousand pound reward, the notice said. I shivered as I stared at the picture, at the grainy black and white image.

"Jesus!" I hissed.

I jumped at the loud bang somewhere off in the darkness but, after a moment, realized it was nothing more than a backfire from the British lorry driving away. I turned back and stared up at the poster, stared up at my own face.

Francis Kelleher. Wanted for murder in Ireland.

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