Chapter One

His wife was determined to march him to the country club this Saturday evening. Worse, he'd have to stuff himself into his old tux like sausage into a casing.

The Irish breakfast—more properly, a resplendent banquet on a plate—was the culprit. He had tried to restrict himself to three such repasts during their stay in County Sligo, but ended up devouring seven, two of them out of view of his wife. He didn't know about Saint Paul, but the grim baggage of diabetes was definitely this cleric's thorn.

'I'm still jet-lagged,' he said.

'Jet-lagged? After ten days? Try again, sweetheart.'

There was a busy silence. They sat in his study, finishing a second cup of coffee. Rain gleamed on the leaves of the maple outside the vast window; fog capped the mountains beyond. 'Our observatory,' he reasoned, when faced with the alarming cost of so much glass.

'It's an important occasion, Timothy. Your doctor is retiring after decades of sleep loss and patients who won't do what the doctor ordered.'

So? Hardly anyone ever did what the priest ordered, either.

'Then he's volunteering to serve in one of the worst areas of famine in the world.'

She pressed her case as he wrestled an unsettling truth—with Hoppy Harper out of the picture, he would fall into the hands of Dr. Wilson, who, in his opinion, was yet the unlicked cub, medically speaking.

'And Father Timothy Kavanagh,' she said, 'highly esteemed friend and longtime priest of the guest of honor, wants to sit home.' The cocked head, the raised eyebrow, the gathering of hoarfrost.

'You're absolutely right,' he said.

'So you're going!'

'Cynthia, Cynthia. I didn't say I'm going, I said you're right that I want to sit home.' He gave forth a sigh.

'You're so southern.'

His Massachusetts-born spouse was keen on the notion that southerners were over-fond of sighing, something apparently beneath the dignity of Yankees. 'You won the war,' his father would have said, 'what's to sigh about?'

Did she have so much time on her hands that she could spend it conducting his business? Since she had started a new book, she should be insensible to life's vagaries for at least ten or eleven months.

'I just read an article,' she said, 'on what can happen to priests when they retire. Some of them end up refusing to leave the house.'

'I have left the house religiously,' he said with feeling.

And there she went, hooting with laughter. It was very hard to have a dispute with a woman who wouldn't stay aggrieved, but was ever looking to put a shine on things.

'I suppose it doesn't count,' he said, 'that I went to see Hoppy on Tuesday and we had a long talk and I prayed for him and wished him well and promised we'd stay in touch with Olivia and Lace whenever he's away.' He watched her eyes; this was clearly not enough.

'I gave him a nice pair of nail clippers,' he said. No need to say it was a pass-along gift from his cousin. 'In a leather case.'

The blank look.

'That was lovely, I'm sure, but it will honor him to have people there, like at a funeral. How would you feel if no one came to your funeral because they'd already said lovely things before you croaked?'

'Okay, okay, I'll do it. Peace be with you, Kav'na. Where are my studs?'

'In the right-hand section of your top bureau drawer. And also with you.'

He thought she looked pretty pleased with herself.

He headed upstairs to try on the tux, to look Veracity in the face, and assemble the required paraphernalia.

His dog lay sprawled and oblivious on the landing, warming himself in a patch of sunlight.

Barnabas raised his head, blinked.

Soon, he would have to move the Old Gentleman down to the study, as stairs were increasingly nonnegotiable for his twelve-year-old Bouvier/Irish wolfhound. He had put off doing it; it would be unsettling for all, even for his wife's cat, Violet.

When Cynthia moved into his bed on their wedding night, Barnabas, ever sensible of common courtesy, had excused himself to the hall and staked new territory. Later, when they moved from the rectory to her house next door, Barnabas again established his night watch in the hall. Even with the increase of arthritis in his hind legs, he had lately made it home base, declining any comforts offered on the ground floor.

Perhaps he would engineer the shift today—carry down the water bowl, the dog bed and blanket, the raccoon with the stuffing gone.

He squatted on his haunches, gave a good scratch beneath the wiry coat.

'What do you think, buddy?'

Barnabas gazed at him, solemn—morning light picked out flecks of amber in the dark pupils.

He couldn't do it today. He could not. They would make the trek again tonight, downstairs for food and a trip to the hedge, and up again, slowly, each step a challenge and then a small triumph. Tomorrow, then.

He stood, trying to focus his attention on the blunt instrument of retirement and how and why the blow still left him reeling. Five years had passed since he'd departed the active priesthood, and as busy as he'd remained, the stunned sense of loss or deficit wouldn't entirely go away. Cynthia was right. If he didn't keep after himself, he could easily disappear into his armchair in the study and not be found again. 'To withdraw someplace,' read a sixteenth century definition of retirement, 'for the sake of seclusion.'

Retirement, of course, hadn't been his idea—he had been urged by his doctor for health reasons. Cynthia had agreed and in the end, so had he.

As for his retiring doctor, Hoppy was as fit as a forty-year-old with no such health reasons. Weren't doctors, like clergy, called to run the race to the all-consuming end? Only then could the crown of laurels be legitimately received. In his own case, diabetes, overwork, and stress had forced him out to pasture at age sixty-five, though he'd supplied pulpits hither and yon ever since.

He remembered how things had progressed. When his bishop announced to the parish the news of Tim Kavanagh's retirement after sixteen years as the chief laborer in their vineyard, he observed more than a few mouths dropping open like the doors of roadside mailboxes. He heard a sharp intake of communal breath, primarily

on the gospel side; a polite handkerchief or two fluttered out. That was expected.

Following the initial shock, however, came something altogether unexpected: their yawning indifference.

At the coffee hour, everyone crowded around, laughing, slapping him on the back and wishing him all the best, and then, like a shot, they fled home to their pot roast, as if no central loss had just occurred.

Where were the emotional breakdowns he'd dreaded, or even, perhaps, guiltily fancied? Where was the long, mournful line at the end of the service, with at least one or two flinging themselves upon him, possibly sobbing, and begging a reversal of this cruel decision?

Dream on. In truth, it was goodbye, Charlie, and have a swell time lounging around the house in your sock feet.

No one had warned him that something quite other would follow. On the heels of indifference came their anger and resentment. The sheer insult of his retirement raced along Main Street like a brush fire—oh, yes, he remembered.

In the how-could-you category, there was everything from the pained look and refusal to wish him a decent good morning, to full-blown righteous indignation. He was theirs, he belonged to them, they had got used to him, and now they were forced to go searching about for a total stranger, never a pleasant task, and God only knows what they'd come up with in this day and time. And it wasn't just his parishioners, but the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Methodists, and every other Tom, Dick, and Harry who felt wantonly betrayed. A veritable Benedict Arnold, he skulked along in the shadows for weeks before the whole thing blew over and they liked him again. Small wonder that retired clergy refused to leave the house.

This missionary impulse of Hoppy's was, of course, noble; he, Timothy, had had such impulses himself—but wasn't being a small-town doctor in today's world noble enough for anybody?

He fought his way to the rear of their overstuffed closet that was once, they suspected, a nursery, and, in the dim light of the bulb they'd been meaning to convert to a blinding spotlight, found the morose thing in its dusty wrap. He took the wrap off, sneezed, and dragged the tux into their bedroom.

He laid it on the bed and stared at it, unseeing. When was their last black-tie affair?

Miss Sadie's party for the newly wed Harpers, of course. How extraordinary that the frugal Miss Sadie had done such a wondrous and extravagant thing, even having Fernbank's shut-away ballroom restored for the occasion. He recalled tables shining with crystal and silver, the music of the eight-piece orchestra, the coved ceiling swarmed by painted angels with gilded wings—and all of it bathed in the glimmer of candlelight. It had been an evening unlike anything Mitford had ever seen, and would almost certainly never see again.

He took the pants off the hanger, inspired. All would be well—the tux would be a tad form-fitting and in need of pressing, but nothing more; he was overreacting.

He glanced toward the corner of their room at the full-length mirror, which presented Absolute Truth morning, noon, and night, whether you wanted it or not. Indeed, unless the need to know was critical, he seldom looked into it.

The need being critical, he shucked out of his clothes and walked to the mirror in his shorts and socks.

It was an inarticulate sound, like a small animal surprised in the woods.

Heaving a fairly shuddering sigh, he set about doing what had to be done. The pants wouldn't zip all the way, much less button; any promise the jacket might have afforded was nil; and the cummerbund, albeit with Velcro, was toast.

He went to the bedroom door and closed it. This wasn't something he wanted even his dog to witness. As for Saturday night, it was obvious that he wasn't meant to leave the house.

He found Cynthia in the kitchen and confessed only 'a slight gain since Miss Sadie's party nearly a decade ago, but enough to, you know . . .'

'I can let it out,' she said. As far as he knew, she had never used a needle in her life. Having Cynthia Kavanagh do his alterations was as reckless as letting their son, Dooley, cut his hair.

'Puny could help,' she said, earnest. 'She's very good at that sort of thing.'

'We don't have a sewing machine,' he said.

'Right next door! Remember Hélène has a sewing machine. It's in the living room by the piano, with all those sheets of music stacked on it. Maybe Hélène sews.'

'People who sew don't stack things on top of the machine.' He knew that much, for Pete's sake. 'Besides, it's an antique, it doesn't actually work.' His sense of doom was literally breathtaking.

'We would use it over there,' she said, oblivious. 'It would be too heavy to carry through the hedge. It was her grandmother's.'

'Have you ever . . . ?'

'Never. I would only show Puny or Hélène the inseams and tell them how much to let out. They would do the rest.'

For years, Puny Guthrie had kept house for him as a bachelor and thereafter for the two of them, yet he'd never heard her mention any sewing skills she may possess.

'Have you checked the inseams?' he asked.

'I'll go up and do it now. Where is it? And by the way, it's time for your raisins.'

'Hanging on the door.' He was too weary to say which door. She gave him the raisin box and he emptied a few into his hand.

If he were a drinking man, it would be a double single-malt scotch, straight up—he could be that specific. Or, not wanting to betray his Irish bloodline, maybe a Paddy's.

SHE FOUND HIM STARING OUT the window of the study, still cupping the raisins in his hand.

'It doesn't have inseams,' she said, pale.

'Of course it has inseams. What else would hold it together?'

'No, I mean, it has them, of course, but they're so *narrow* . . .' She looked desperate.

'Cheap,' he said.

'What?'

'It was cheap. It must cost extra for inseams that can be let out.'

They sat on the sofa, where so many details of life had been threshed.

'The Internet,' she said. 'Overnight shipping, which gives us time to hem the pants.'

'No way,' he said.

He didn't want to talk about the last time they trusted the caprice of shopping on the Internet, and the thing arriving without screws to assemble it. He would never mention again how he had tracked the screws through a jungle of recorded phone messages, which eventually led to a real person who said he would take care of it immediately. He would never again speak of the many additional phone calls unanswered by the real person, and the weeks that ensued before the screws were delivered—not to his door, oh, no, but to the Local down the street, where the minuscule package had somehow fallen into a basket of California avocados and remained for a further week.

'Why are we doing this at the last minute?' he said.

'Because I thought all along you were going. Why wouldn't you go to the retirement party of a man who was your parishioner for sixteen years, your doctor for as many, a close personal friend, and the adoptive father of Dooley's sort-of-maybe fiancée?'

He held a raisin between his thumb and forefinger, examined it, dubious.

'It's also worth mentioning that he saved your life,' she said. 'Twice.'

There was the real rub, of course. 'Okay, okay, I said I'm going.' He could take to his bed from this ordeal, become an invalid sipping water through a bent straw. 'Why can't I just wear a suit and collar?'

She gave him a look containing its own vocabulary, then stared at the bookshelves, possibly thinking of dust; he studied his loafers, thinking of nothing in particular.

He was thrilled when the doorbell rang. He leaped up and sprinted along the hall like a released felon.

'Puny!' Her good face, freckles and all, had cheered him ever since he first saw it more than a decade ago.

'I know it's my day off, but I brought you somethin'.'

'Where are the twins?' He knew the older set to be in school at this hour.

'In th' car, I don't have but a minute. I jis' come from seein' Joe Joe at th' station, he might git to be police chief.'

She was radiant, dazzling him.

'Holy smoke. He just got to be captain.'

'Don't tell nobody, just Miss Cynthy.'

'Of course. When will we know?' he asked.

'Maybe in a week or two is what they say.'

'Is Rodney Underwood retiring?'

'Kind of.'

'Kind of?'

'It's still a secret, but yes, he's leavin' to be chief at Wesley.'

'A big step up.'

'So y'all pray, okay? And here's th' little somethin' I brought you.' She handed him a small envelope. 'Take it with a full glass of water in th' evenin' an' don't leave th' house.'

He pocketed the thing, feeling the heat in his face.

'You're . . . kind,' he said.

'CHESTER MCGRAW!' SHE EXCLAIMED AS he walked into the study.

'What about him?'

'He was your size exactly. I remember seeing him from behind at Logan's in Wesley, and thinking it was you. Timothy! I said. What are you doing in the pantyhose section? But it was Chester.'

'What was he doing in the pantyhose section?'

'I have no idea, he didn't say. Anyway, he's, you know . . .'

'Morte,' he said. 'Last February. A good man, Chester, we were in Rotary together.'

'Who was at the door?'

'Puny.'

'Really? What about?'

'Just checking in, says Joe Joe might be made police chief.'

'Wonderful. When?'

'We don't know,' he said. 'Don't tell anybody, it's a secret. Have a raisin.'

'No, thanks. He had a tux.'

'Joe Joe?'

'Chester. Chester had a very nice tux.'

'Whoa, now, Kav'na.'

'He wore it to the Children's Hospital benefit last year, remember? When he gave that huge check. So if Irene hasn't thrown it out . . .'

'Wait a minute . . .'

'Why not? He made a barrel of money in the timber business, it would be a very nice tux. I'll call Irene, she's a darling woman.'

He felt a provoking urge to flee to Lord's Chapel and kneel at the railing.

'Irene didn't answer, she's probably in the garden.'

How his wife knew so much about Irene McGraw was beyond him. He knew only that Irene was said to look like a film star whose name he didn't recognize. He scanned his mental file on the McGraws: Baptists. Florida residents for the annual requisite of six months and a day. A lot of grandchildren.

'Shouldn't I . . . that is . . .' If he was going to wear another man's getup, shouldn't it be that of somebody in his own parish? 'Maybe somebody at Lord's Chapel . . .' he said, hating this.

'Nobody at Lord's Chapel is your size, Chester was an absolute duplicate.'

Useful beyond the grave—it was everyone's hope.

'Besides,' she said, 'anyone who has a tux at Lord's Chapel will be wearing it Saturday night.'

His wife knew everything. An honors graduate of Smith, of course—he wondered if all Smithies were like this.

'Ride with me,' she said, taking her keys off the hook at the kitchen door.

'Why?'

She gave him a doting look. 'Because I love your company.'

But there was nothing at all to love about his company. He was a certified crank these days. Not that he wanted to be, but he seemed unable to control the mean streak that had cropped up somewhere over the Pond, possibly around Greenland.

'Besides,' she said, cheerful as all get-out, 'that's what retirement is for.'

'I'm still trying to hammer out what retirement is for.'

'It's for jumping in the car and going somewhere on impulse.'

'I'll stick around here,' he said, loath to beg handouts from a recent widow.

'Irene won't even see you, I'll park in front of the hedge instead of in the driveway. Take your newspaper, I'll just be a minute. Then we can run by the Local.'

She gave him the look that was code for the rare pint of Ben & Jerry's. He was suddenly cheered.

'I'm in,' he said.

She backed her Mazda out of the garage.

'What if she gave it to the Salvation Army?' he asked.

'Too soon, I think.'

'So there's a timeline for cleaning out the spousal closet?'

'Usually six months to a year. Some people do it immediately after.'

He chewed on this arcane information, especially curious about the marital revelations of 'immediately after.'

'By the way,' she said, 'if I croak first, my clothes go to Puny and my jewelry to Lace, except for your mother's ring.'

'Where does that go?'

'If Dooley and Lace marry, to Lace. If not, it could pass to your next wife.'

He refused to comment.

She made a right onto Main. 'Just kidding, of course. Do you think you'd marry again?'

'Absolutely not. I was barely able to marry the first time, much less again.' She had just asked him this ridiculous question in Ireland.

He could sense her staring at him.

'What?' he said.

'I know how you hate hearing this, but . . .'

'But.'

'You need a haircut.'

'I just had a haircut. Two or three weeks ago.'

'That was a trim, not a cut. They left it too long.'

His wife needed a steady, paying job, not one in which she could do as she pleased, with time left over to mind his business.

'Merely a word to the wise,' she said.

He turned his attentions to Main Street, which was literally sparkling after a good wash by morning rain. He realized again how Mitford wasn't unlike an Irish village—colorful storefronts, hanging baskets, benches, a brisk early business in the shops.

'The big news while we were gone,' she said, 'is that Avis painted his bins.'

How had he missed that on his two wimpy morning runs through town? Beneath the green awnings of the Local were the famed outdoor produce bins, now as red as any tomato and filled with pots of yellow chrysanthemums.

'Very Irish, all that color, don't you think?'

'I do.' There was Avis Packard, standing outside his grocery store, smoking a cigarette.

In the end, the real difference between Mitford and the Irish village was pretty profound—Mitford was home, Main Street was his beat. After a year in Whitecap, a year at Meadowgate, the long sojurns in Mississippi and Memphis, and the trek to Ireland, it felt good to ease his foot into the old shoe.

'Irene is a gifted artist,' she said. 'Paintings of children. We've talked about doing a show together, a benefit for the Children's Hospital.'

'You hadn't mentioned it.' Children's Hospital in Wesley was his

all-time favorite charity. Never one to relish asking for money, he had nonetheless helped raise $350,000 in the last campaign and thanks be to God for the Florida people who summered in Mitford and environs.

'Sort of waiting 'til we know more about her schedule. Her daughter lost a baby last year, but now there's another on the way. Then there are two little ones in California and four in Texas and one in Germany. She's very busy.'

'Blow the horn,' he said.

He rolled down the window. J. C. Hogan, editor of the *Mitford Muse*, was legging it across the street to Town Hall.

'Tea shop, noon tomorrow!' he shouted.

A thumbs-up from J.C.

He didn't like blaring it all over town that he was headed to the tea shop, tomorrow or any other day. They needed to change the blasted name, make it friendlier to the Mitford demographic.

He left the window down, inhaled rain-washed September air into his lungs. 'Maybe we should try a new flavor this time.'

'It took decades for you to upscale from vanilla to butter pecan.'

'One cannot upscale from vanilla to anything. Vanilla is the crème de la crème, and butter pecan merely passing fancy. However, I have felt the call of a completely different flavor for a couple of years, but never had the guts to buy it. How about Cherry Garcia?' *Carpe diem*.

She patted his knee, laughing. 'You are a wild and crazy guy.'

He didn't know how he felt about being patted. When she did that, and she often did that, he felt four years old, or possibly one up from a small-breed canine.

He moved his knee away, impatient, and opened the *Mitford Muse*. The local weekly had grown considerably thinner of late, but the front page still gave forth a blare of four-color process.

'Timothy?'

'Speak, Kav'na.'

Mule Skinner was running a quarter-page real estate ad below an ad for residential sewage treatment. Not a good placement. And there was the Helpful Household Hint for the week—he'd never admit to anybody but Puny that he looked for it each Thursday.

'Are you listening?' she said.

"I am, I am.' *Shoes can be shined with a banana peel. Clean off mess with a dry cloth.*

She wheeled right on Lilac—a little sharply, he thought.

'Do you think you might try what Puny suggested yesterday?' she asked.

Never one to mince words, Puny Guthrie had told him that what he needed was a good . . .

He buried his face in the newspaper.

. . . purgative.

HERE HE WAS SITTING in a car when he might be running up to the stone wall and looking upon life in the valley—the train hammering through the gorge, with a winding river and blue mountains beyond. It was a mild and perfect day, golden with sunlight after rain—one of his favorite weather conditions.

How would Irene McGraw feel about him bowling around town in her husband's gear? He considered that Irene may even be at the party. In times past, the spouse left behind waited a year before rejoining the social gambol, but the way things were going these days, this had likely been tempered by half.

The tux business was beyond him, he couldn't think about it anymore. He crossed himself and gave kit and caboodle to the creator of all that is seen and unseen.

GOOD NEWS AT A CUT ABOVE

> Mrs. Fancy Skinner of A Cut Above Hair Salon, has announced TWO new additions to her shop starting next Monday.
>
> One is Wi-fi service (bring your iPads and laptops!) and last but not least, here's the biggie—a new stylist, Ms. Shirlene Hatfield, formerly of The Hair Loft in Bristol, Tennessee, and a sister of Ms. Skinner!
>
> Ms. Skinner says Ms. Hatfield will offer a full-compliment of beauty services including spray tanning. In a phone interview with the Muse, Ms. Hatfield said: 'I will be proud to introduce spraytan to Mitford. With spraytan, everybody in the mountains can look like they just drove up from Florida.'

Not a good marketing tactic. Mountain folk wouldn't aspire to looking like the tanned throng arriving from Florida every May to take up all the parking spaces.

> A hearty Mitford welcome to Ms. Hatfield! See below for the "Shirlene Hatfield $2.00-off haircut coupon' from the popular Cut Above Hair Salon where walk-ins are always welcome. Another $$$- saving bonus from the Muse—we print GOOD news!!

No expiration date on the coupon; he would clip it for Dooley's long weekend home in October. A coupon in the *Muse* was as rare as hen's teeth; the Wesley weekly was eating J.C.'s lunch by giving readers an entire page of coupons every Friday, not to mention a crossword.

In his shirt pocket, his cell phone did its marching band number, very festive.

'Hello?'

'Hey, Dad . . .'

Static. A lot of it.

'Dooley? Can you hear me?'

' . . . out . . . thinking . . . got to . . .'

'Dooley, you're breaking up. Can you . . . ?'

Gone.

They were pretty high on the mountain, no service up here, he supposed. He hated to miss a call from his boy.

Chelsea TEA shop
Adds Children's Plate

He refolded the newspaper, read on.

Clearly, the tea shop was being forced to go with the times and expand their customer base. Only yesterday, he'd heard the new ownership said there would be no more fancy names the average customer couldn't pronounce, including *croissant*. More to the point, the ruffled pink curtains had vanished during their Ireland trip, the flowered wallpaper had disappeared under a coat of green paint, and the radio was tuned to Top 40 instead of Easy Listening. Now here was the family-friendly children's plate, which he hoped grown-ups would feel free to order when short on cash or not very hungry. But the real work had yet to be done—in his opinion, they needed to dump the name of the place, pronto, give it more of a family flavor. Who took their kids to tea? Nobody that he knew of.

Cynthia appeared at the car window.

'She's not in the garden, and the front door is open. I went in and called, but no answer, and I looked in her studio out back.'

'There's a car in the garage.' He'd seen it as they drew up to the hedge.

'That's not her car, its Chester's. I wonder if I should go upstairs and look for her.'

'Maybe she's in town, or visiting a neighbor.'

'Remember what happened to Norma Jenkins.'

Norma's front door had stood open for two days as she lay upstairs following a stroke, unable to cry for help and paralyzed throughout her left side.

'I'm sure she's fine,' he said. How many times had he left his own doors wide open as he worked in the back yard or the basement? Of course, those were his early years in Mitford; things were different now, as they were everywhere.

'I don't think she's the sort to leave her door open if she isn't home.'

'You seem to know her pretty well,' he said.

'We've had three art classes together. I taught two of them, she taught the other.'

'What about household help?'

'Her housekeeper goes back to Florida around the first of September, she said, and Irene goes back late October.'

'I have an idea—why don't we head to the Local and forget this whole tux business? Come on,' he said, 'we'll figure it out. I'll rent one from Charlotte, they could put it on the plane to Hickory.'

She wasn't listening. 'I'm going inside and look for her, I feel creepy about this.'

He glanced farther along Bishop's Lane. Only one neighboring house in view, perhaps half a block away.

'Go in with me,' she said. 'Remember what happened to Norma.'

'Okay. I'll wait downstairs and make feeble excuses when she comes home.'

But she didn't come home. While Cynthia called Irene's name upstairs and down, he ambled about the living room off the foyer, peering at a series of five large oil paintings of what appeared to be the same young girl, signed Irene McGraw. He saw in the faces an inter-

esting detail so small that he surprised himself by noticing it at all. The eyes of each subject contained a subtle, but compelling, reflection: the nearly minuscule image of the subject. He adjusted his glasses and leaned close. It was as if the large subject were looking at herself dressed in different clothing—a yellow dress. The painted pupil was a miniature gem—to render such a feat required inordinate skill and, perhaps, the merest hair of a sable.

He looked at his watch, heard Cynthia calling Irene's name.

On the grand piano, family photographs in silver frames. A lot of grandchildren, a perfect flock of them. He had missed having grandchildren, but Puny's two sets of twins had stood in the gap very well.

He thought of his brother, Henry, so recently known to him after all these years, and of what they'd gone through together in Memphis and Holly Springs, and wondered what his Kavanagh family portrait would look like now, with Henry among them.

In a large photograph of the McGraws in this very room, the couple was surrounded by roughly two dozen good-looking progeny dressed to the nines. A life had been lived here—all those grandchildren tumbling and laughing, someone shouting, Don't run in the hall, someone playing the piano, cousins kicking around a football. Like a lot of people who also live in tropical places, they probably spent Christmas and Thanksgiving here, hoping for snow. Now one was missing from this glad company. As for Irene, she would go on and things would be good again—but different, very different.

He'd always thought Irene an unusually attractive woman, but with a subtle air of sorrow or distraction, as if she were actually living elsewhere and had beamed in a likeness for a fund-raiser. He remembered that she played tennis and wore what his mother had called 'good' pearls.

He was turning away from the photograph when he realized that Chester—ha!—was sporting the much-talked-about tuxedo.

He moved into the hall as his wife came downstairs.

'She's not here.'

'I think we should go,' he said. 'You could call later.'

'This doesn't feel right, Timothy. You should see her bedroom. Things thrown all over the place. Not like her. Come and look.'

Clothes tossed on an unmade bed, drawers pulled out, closet doors standing open, clothing on the floor, an exercise mat with a bottle of water beside it.

'What do you think?' she said.

He shrugged. 'This is the way a lot of people's bedrooms look.' Dooley's room in the early days of living at the rectory, for instance.

'It doesn't feel like Irene, she's fastidious. Always cleans her brushes and palette and puts them away in her carryall.'

'She's plenty gifted,' he said. 'The paintings . . .'

'Yes, and she's never shown or sold anything. I was thrilled when she said she'd consider the Children's Hospital benefit.'

'Who's her best friend?' he asked. 'We could call somebody.'

'Everyone likes her, but I don't know about best friends.'

He looked around again, paying attention. Message light blinking on a phone by the bed, windows raised a few inches, empty hangers on a closet door pull. They walked into the bathroom. Windows open a couple of inches. Drops of moisture on the glass door of the shower. A towel on the floor.

He stooped and felt the towel—damp—then looked out to the rear lawn. That would be the studio, surrounded by a fairly ambitious garden with an open potting shed. Beyond, a dense thicket of rhododendron and oaks.

'What do you think?' asked his wife.

'I think she's in town or maybe she drove to Wesley; we need to get out of here.'

'I pray she's all right. Should we close the front door?'

'Best to leave things as we found them. I'm sure she's fine.'

How did they manage to everlastingly insinuate themselves into other people's business, Ireland being a prime example?

She sighed; he declined to mention it.

'Maybe we should do our shopping at the Local,' she said, 'and come by again before we go home?'

'Good. Let's do it, let's go.'

'I'd really like to check out her closet to see if Chester's tux is in there.'

'Good Lord, woman, leave off.'

He took her hand and led her to the top of the stairs, and down they went. Cherry Garcia.