

Christine Falls - Chapter 1

It was not the dead that seemed to Quirke uncanny but the living. When he walked into the morgue long after midnight and saw Malachy Griffin there he felt a shiver along his spine that was to prove prophetic, a tremor of troubles to come. Mal was in Quirke's office, sitting at the desk. Quirke stopped in the unlit body room, among the shrouded forms on their trolleys, and watched him through the open doorway. He was seated with his back to the door, leaning forward intently in his steel-framed spectacles, the desk lamp lighting the left side of his face and making an angry pink glow through the shell of his ear. He had a file open on the desk before him and was writing in it with peculiar awkwardness. This would have struck Quirke as stranger than it did if he had not been drunk. The scene sparked a memory in him from their school days together, startlingly clear, of Mal, intent like this, sitting at a desk among fifty other earnest students in a big hushed hall, as he laboriously composed an examination essay, with a beam of sunlight falling slantways on him from a window somewhere high above. A quarter of a century later he still had that smooth seal's head of oiled black hair, scrupulously combed and parted.

Sensing a presence behind him, Mal turned his face and peered into the shadowy dark of the body room. Quirke waited a moment and then stepped forward, with some unsteadiness, into the light in the doorway.

"Quirke," Mal said, recognizing him with relief and giving him an exasperated sigh. "For God's sake."

Mal was in evening clothes but uncharacteristically unbuttoned, his bow tie undone and the collar of his white dress shirt open. Quirke, groping in his pockets for his cigarettes, contemplated him, noting the way he put his forearm quickly over the file to hide it, and was reminded again of school.

"Working late?" Quirke said, and grinned crookedly, the alcohol allowing him to think it a telling piece of wit.

"What are you doing here?" Mal said, too loudly, ignoring the question. He pushed the spectacles up the damp bridge of his nose with a tap of a fingertip. He was nervous.

Quirke pointed to the ceiling. "Party," he said. "Upstairs."

Mal assumed his consultant's face, frowning imperiously. "Party? What party?"

"Brenda Rutledge," Quirke said. "One of the nurses. Her going away."

Mal's frown deepened. "Rutledge?"

Quirke was suddenly bored. He asked if Mal had a cigarette, for he seemed to have none of his own, but Mal ignored this question too. He stood up, deftly sweeping the file with him, still trying to hide it under his arm. Quirke, though he had to squint, saw the name scrawled in large handwritten letters on the cover of it: *Christine Falls*. Mal's fountain pen was on the desk, a Parker, fat and black and shiny, with a gold nib, no doubt, twenty-two karat, or more if it was possible; Mal had a taste for rich things, it was one of his few weaknesses.

"How is Sarah?" Quirke asked. He let himself droop sideways heavily until his shoulder found the support of the doorjamb. He felt dizzy, and everything was keeping up a flickering, leftward lurch. He was at the rueful stage of having drunk too much and knowing that there was nothing to be done but wait until the effects wore off. Mal had his back to him, putting the file into a drawer of the tall gray filing cabinet.

"She's well," Mal said. "We were at a Knights dinner. I sent her home in a taxi."

"Knights?" Quirke said, widening his eyes blearily.

Mal turned to him a blank, expressionless look, the lenses of his glasses flashing. "Of St. Patrick. As if you didn't know."

"Oh," Quirke said. "Right." He looked as if he were trying not to laugh. "Anyway," he said, "never mind about me, what are you doing, down here among the dead men?"

Mal had a way of bulging out his eyes and drawing upward sinuously his already long, thin form, as if to the music of a snake charmer's flute. Quirke had to marvel, not for the first time, at the polished luster of that hair, the smoothness of the brow beneath, the untarnished steely blue of his eyes behind the pebble glass of his specs.

"I had a thing to do," Mal said. "A thing to check."

"What thing?"

Mal did not answer. He studied Quirke and saw how drunk he was, and a cold glint of relief came into his eye.

"You should go home," he said.

Quirke thought to dispute this—the morgue was his territory—but again suddenly he lost all interest. He shrugged, and with Mal still watching him he turned and weaved away among the body-bearing trolleys. Halfway across the room he stumbled and reached out quickly to the edge of a trolley to steady himself but he managed only to grab the

sheet, which came away in his hand in a hissing white flash. He was struck by the clammy coldness of the nylon; it had a human feel, like a loose, chill cowl of bloodless skin. The corpse was that of a young woman, slim and yellow-haired; she had been pretty, but death had robbed her of her features and now she might be a carving in soapstone, primitive and bland. Something, his pathologist's instinct perhaps, told him what the name would be before he looked at the label tied to her toe. "Christine Falls," he murmured. "You were well named." Looking more closely he noticed the dark roots of her hair at the forehead and temples: dead, and not even a real blonde.