Chapter 1

Manchester, 22 November 1867

Midnight. There are field guns on Stanley Street, and timber barricades at every bridge and junction. Bright flames from a dozen watch fires glint orange off the black and boatless Irwell. Inside the town hall on King Street, James O'Connor knocks the rain from his bowler, unbuttons his overcoat and hangs them both on the iron hooks by the recreation-room door. Sanders and Malone, and four or five others, are sleeping on palliasses in one corner; the rest are sitting about at tables playing whist, gabbing or reading the *Courier*. The place has the homely barracks tang of stewed tea and Navy Cut, there is a rack of Indian clubs and medicine balls gathering dust by the left-hand wall, and a billiard table covered over with planking in the centre. Fazackerley, the duty sergeant, notices him and nods.

'Anything?'

O'Connor shakes his head.

'There'll be someone shows himself eventually,' Fazackerley says. 'Some daft bastard full of ale. There's always one. You wait and see.'

O'Connor pulls a chair across and sits himself down. Fazackerley half-fills a dented metal teapot with scalding water from the urn and swirls it twice.

'I'm the only Irishman awake this side of Kingstown,' O'Connor tells him. 'All the others are safe in their beds doing as the priests advised and staying well away.'

'I thought your Fenian boys didn't pay too much attention to the Monsignors.'

'They pay attention when it suits them,' he says. 'Much like the rest of us.'

Fazackerley nods, allows himself a smile. His face is a bristled mass of lines and planes, his eyebrows are unkempt, and his greying hair is scant and greasy. If it wasn't for the incongruent brightness of his pale blue eyes – more like the eyes of a newborn babe or a china doll than a man past fifty – he might look exhausted, gone-to-seed, but, as it is, he presents, even at rest, an impression of half-amused readiness, vigour even.

'They've seen the cavalry trotting up and down Deansgate,' O'Connor goes on. 'They've seen the cannons and the barricades. They're not as stupid as you think.'

'There are three of 'em who won't look so very clever come eight o'clock, I'd say.'

Fazackerley tilts his head to one side and makes a bog-eyed, strangulated face, but O'Connor takes no notice. It's

been nine months now since he arrived on secondment from Dublin and he's become used to the ways of his English colleagues. Always joking with him, striving to get a rise, always prodding and poking about to see what he will say or do in answer. Friendly enough at first sight, but beneath the smiles and laughter he senses their mistrust. Who is he anyway, they wonder, this sudden Irishman, come to tell them how to do their jobs? Even Fazackerley, who is the best by far, treats him, most of the time, as an amusing oddity, some kind of strange exception to the rule, like a visiting Apache or a dancing bear. Other men would feel insulted, but O'Connor lets it pass. He has no desire to explain himself. It is much simpler and easier, sometimes, he thinks, to be misunderstood.

'Maybury asked to see you as soon as you got back,' Fazackerley says, straightening himself. 'He's up with Palin now.'

'Maybury and Palin together? What do they want with me?'

Fazackerley laughs.

'You're the true fucking oracle, Head Constable O'Connor. Didn't you know that? They want you to tell them what the future holds.'

'If they'd paid me any heed before, then Charley Brett might still be living.'

'That could be true, but it'll do you not the slightest good to point it out. Our great lords and masters don't generally enjoy being reminded of their missteps.'

'I hear Palin's out on his arse anyway after all this dies down. Pensioned off.'

'Policemen do love to gossip, don't they?' Fazackerley says. 'Do you fancy your chances of taking over if he goes, Jimmy? Chief Constable O'Connor, is it?'

Fazackerley snorts at the idea as if he has just made a great joke. O'Connor finishes his tea, tugs down his waistcoat and politely advises the duty sergeant to bugger off.

Upstairs, he listens for a moment at the office door. He knows Maybury well enough, but he has seen the chief constable only at a distance on official occasions – standing on a dais or seated on a charger. Palin is a short, soldierly-looking man. And, in public at least, rigid and a little twitchy. The day of the ambush he was away somewhere, unreachable, and the various clear warnings went unheeded as a consequence. A clerk in the head office has already been dismissed for it, but now the rumours are that the home secretary, Mr Gathorne Hardy, has intervened and Palin will eventually be made to step down. Forced retirement to the country and an afterlife of ease and plenty being about as rough as it ever gets for a fellow like him.

O'Connor hears them talking through the door – Palin's low voice, Maybury's occasional interruptions – but can't make out the words. He knocks, the conversation pauses, and Maybury calls him to come in. Neither man smiles or rises from his chair. Maybury, who is of medium height, stout with muttonchop whiskers and port wine stain on one cheek, nods once. Palin gazes suspiciously at O'Connor as if he has seen him before but can't remember where. Both men are in

their shirtsleeves and Palin is smoking a cigar. There is a jar of mustard and a bottle of vinegar on the table; a smell of sausage lingers in the blueish air.

'The sergeant told me you wanted to see me, sir,' he says to Maybury.

Maybury glances at Palin, offering him the chance to speak first, but Palin shakes his head.

'Give us your report, please, Head Constable O'Connor,' Maybury says. He makes it sound as if this is a normal, everyday duty, as if reporting direct to the chief constable of Manchester in the middle of the night is part of his job.

O'Connor takes his notebook from his inside pocket and thumbs its pages.

'I've been walking the town all day,' he says. 'And I've spoken with some of my informers. I'm confident we have nothing to fear tonight. The hangings will go off smoothly, I'm sure of it. If the reprisals come, they will come later on, when things have quieted down a little. After the troops have all left town.'

'So you have heard some talk of reprisals?'

'Oh, there's plenty of talking, sir, as there always is, but it's nothing we need to take too seriously for now.'

'The Fenians are frightened of us, then,' Palin says lightly, as if the conclusion is obvious. 'Our show of force has worked as we expected.'

'For now, sir, yes,' O'Connor agrees, 'but in a month or two I expect the situation will be different.'

'Different how?' Maybury asks.

'The executions will provoke anger. There is already a strong belief that the sentences are unjust, that Sergeant Brett's death was manslaughter at worst, not murder. When the three men are hanged, then others who were on the outskirts of the Brotherhood will likely be drawn closer in. The Manchester circles may end up larger and stronger than they were before.'

Palin frowns at this and sits up straighter in his chair.

'I don't follow that reasoning,' he says. 'You seem to be suggesting that a severe punishment might actually serve as an encouragement to others to commit a similar crime. How could that ever be the case? What is the sense?'

O'Connor glances at Maybury for help, but Maybury merely raises his eyebrows and smiles blandly back.

'If you create martyrs, sir, then that is a powerful thing.'

'*Martyrs?*' Palin says. 'These men are not martyrs; they are common criminals. They killed a policeman in cold blood.'

'I agree, sir, of course, but that's not the general opinion in the Irish parts of town.'

'Then the general opinion makes little sense to me. Are your countrymen really as foolish as all that?' he says. 'Will they never learn their lessons?'

O'Connor doesn't answer straight away. He still remembers when they brought the old rebel Terence MacManus back from California in '61, and half of Dublin turned out in the brown fog and pelting rain to watch the funeral parade. They were leaning out of windows and standing six deep in Mountjoy Square that day. When the column reached the gates of Glasnevin Cemetery it was near-enough two miles

long. Twenty thousand Dubliners and barely even a whisper when they laid him in the tomb. If you give the Fenians a corpse, then you'd better believe they'll know what to do with it, he thinks. Before they brought Terence Bellew MacManus home, the Fenians were nothing to speak about, but the next day they were the anointed successors to the men of '48. Heroes all in-waiting. A clever man will never underestimate the motive power of dust and bones, but Palin isn't clever. None of them are.

'Most of my countrymen are poor and untutored, sir,' O'Connor explains. 'The Fenians take advantage of their ignorance. They promise them freedom and an end to all their sufferings.'

'The Fenians are fanatics.'

'Quite true, sir, but fanatics are not easily discouraged.'

'Neither are *we* easily discouraged,' Palin says. 'That's my point, Constable. The British Empire is not a weak or fragile thing; it has survived worse mutinies than this one. Perhaps you should ask your friends to pass that message along. Let our enemies know they are sacrificing themselves in a hopeless cause.'

'That's not quite . . .'

O'Connor starts to answer, but Maybury interrupts him.

'His friends are not in a position to pass on messages, sir,' Maybury explains. 'Their lives would be in danger.'

'Of course,' Palin says, 'of course. I forget.'

There is a pause. Coal crumbles in the grate. Palin sniffs twice and rubs the tip of his cigar into an empty coffee cup.

'Where do we get these informers from anyway?' he asks, turning to Maybury. 'And how do we know they can be trusted?'

'Generally they make themselves known to us,' Maybury explains. 'It's money that they're after. We treat what they tell us with caution, but it sometimes proves useful. If we understand what the Fenians are planning we can usually nip it in the bud.'

Palin scratches his chin and frowns.

'Men like that are parasites. I wonder sometimes that we lower ourselves.'

'To get to the treasure you must sometimes swim through the shite, sir,' Maybury says cheerfully, as if quoting an old proverb. 'That's why we have Constable O'Connor here.'

Palin nods, smiles, then looks across.

'I see. Is that what you do for us, O'Connor?' he asks, twitching a little at the indelicacy of the phrase. 'Swim through the shite?'

'In a manner of speaking, sir, yes, I suppose you could say it is.'

'And you enjoy this work? You find it suits you?'

O'Connor recognises that he is being mocked now, that Palin is letting him know where he stands. He is well used to being goaded by his English colleagues, but he is still surprised that the chief constable himself should feel the need.

'I do my duty, sir,' he says. 'As best I can. I trust that the work I do is of some small value.'

Palin shrugs.

'We are waging a tiresome battle against a puny and irrational foe. None of us will be getting any medals for it, Constable, I can promise you that.'

O'Connor nods at this, but doesn't answer. He gazes down at his toecaps: scuffed black leather against the swirling reds and greens of Palin's Persian carpet. He feels the warmth of the fire against his calves and backside. He has learned to keep his own counsel at times like this. There is nothing much to be gained by speaking out, he knows, but plenty to be lost.

'You should get back to your work now,' Maybury tells him. 'Let us know if you hear anything more of interest.'

'And tell Harris to bring us more coffee,' Palin says, stretching forward for the evening paper. 'This pot's already dead.'

Downstairs in the recreation room, O'Connor plays whist instead of sleeping. He loses a shilling, then wins it back, then loses it again. At first light, he settles up with Fazackerley, puts his hat and overcoat on and goes back outside. Soot-black buildings stand clenched beneath a marbled sky. He crosses Deansgate and follows Bridge Street down towards the Irwell. Ragged groups of red-eyed men, disgorged from the beer houses, blink and look quizzically about as if trying to remember exactly where and who they are. Shawl-clad women clustering in doorways laugh together, shake their heads and hug themselves against the cold. The shop windows are boarded in case of trouble, but there are hand

barrows selling coffee and pies, and ragamuffin boys crying halfpenny broadsides. O'Connor pauses on the Albert Bridge and watches the crowd gradually assemble.

They come in twos and threes, in sixes and sevens. From Knott Mill and Ancoats, from Salford and Shude Hill. Dark bulky figures dressed in wool and fustian. Their skin is yellowed and grimy. They smell, as they brush past him, chattering and jokey, of sawdust and pipe smoke and the acrid ingrained sweat of endless mill work. There is grandeur in a hanging, O'Connor admits – it's like watching a fine house burn down, or a great ship come to wreck. Seeing such a sight you feel, just for a moment, that you have glanced into the heart of something, that all the coyness of this world has briefly dropped away, and you are left with the nub.

Special constables, youthful irregulars, brought in from Rochdale and Preston, are massed below the gibbet to guard against sudden attack. They smoke, laugh, wrestle, sing songs; occasionally they are brought to order and made to drill. They have staves as weapons and white badges on their sleeves to indicate their status. There is much lighthearted toing and froing across the wooden barricades, much raucousness and taunting. As the sky lightens to the east, the crowd thickens and O'Connor feels an excitement growing inside him, in his chest and belly, down into his balls. He cannot help it. He is human like the rest. As he walks over the bridge towards the prison, the crowd warms and rubs against him; he tastes their beery breath, breathes

it in and feels, for a moment, part of something greater than himself – a shared desire, a sharp but indefinite urge. Up on the railway viaduct overlooking the prison's north wall, there are lines of red-coated infantry with rifles and bayonets. Blue-uniformed policemen stand in silent groups at every junction. The prison clock strikes out the half-hour.

The soldiers are a mistake, O'Connor thinks – brute force won't resolve the Fenian problem, and the sight of troops makes people imagine we are at war. Such displays of might serve no good purpose; they only add more fuel to the fire. It is hard detective work and good judgement that will win this fight, he believes, not exhibitions of bombast or cruelty. Yet cruelty and bombast are what the English prefer. He has expressed this opinion, in more measured tones, in reports to Maybury and letters back to Dublin Castle, but he could be writing them in Chinese or Hebrew, for all the difference it makes.

As the clock strikes eight, the people around him stop talking and look upwards. A door at the rear of the scaffold opens and a tall priest in full canonicals steps onto the platform followed by one of the condemned men – William Allen. The priest is reciting the liturgy and Allen, who appears frail and weak-kneed, is responding. *Christ have mercy on us. Lord have mercy on us.* Their entwined voices are faint but clear. Allen glances out at the crowd then looks away again. Calcraft the hangman appears next on the platform, followed by the other two prisoners, O'Brien and Larkin, each with a warden and an intoning priest in tow. Allen's eyes are closed

and his pinioned hands are raised up in clumsy prayer. The priest is whispering into his ear. Calcraft fits and tightens the nooses, binds their ankles, and puts a white cotton bag over each man's head. O'Brien edges sideways and kisses Allen clumsily on the cheek. Larkin's legs buckle and there is a small commotion as one of the priests and a warden struggle to keep him upright. Calcraft, unperturbed, moves back and forth along the platform, checking and readjusting the fastenings with the quick, fidgety expertness of a tailor sizing suits. He gazes briefly at his work, nods in satisfaction, then steps away. O'Connor hears the caw of a crow like a dry cork being pulled from a bottle and, from over near the river, a clatter of cartwheels and the whinny of a horse. For a long moment, the three men stand side by side beneath the heavy oak crossbeam, separate but conjoined, like rough-hewn caryatids, and then with a startling suddenness they are gone. Instead of their breathing, living bodies there are only the three taut lines of rope like long vertical scratches on the prison wall. The crowd inhales then gives up a long guttural sigh like a wave slowly pulling back from a beach. O'Connor shudders, swallows, feels a pulse of nausea sweep up from his stomach into his mouth.

There is a pause, a silent gap, the crucial moment seems to have passed, then one of the ropes starts to twitch and swing and there are grunts of exertion from the fenced-off compartment below the platform. Boos ring out, then catcalls. The priests break off their prayers and peer downward. The rope continues its twitching, and Larkin's

bagged head bobs up and down like a half-hooked fish as Armstrong the apprentice executioner lifts the body up and tugs it down again to finish the job. *Sweet Jesus, is it really so complicated to kill a man?* O'Connor wonders. *The rope*, he thinks, *the fucking drop. How difficult can it be?*

He turns and starts shouldering his way back through the dense and shifting crowd. Out of habit, he looks around as he moves, checking for familiar faces. Off to the left, thirty feet away, he notices Tommy Flanagan standing alone, wearing a greasy beaver hat and smoking a meerschaum. Of course, O'Connor thinks, if any man is going to ignore all dictates of wisdom and good sense, it will likely be Thomas Flanagan. He stands a while and looks at him. Flanagan sucks his pipe, blows out the grey smoke, blinks and glances upwards. He is a short, scrappy-looking fellow, with thick black eyebrows, sucked-in cheeks and a nose too large for his narrow face. He looks, as he always does, much too pleased with himself. You might think he had just won at the horses, not witnessed three of his countrymen being hanged by their necks until dead. O'Connor moves closer in and tries to catch his eye. When Flanagan finally notices him, he frowns, then smiles quickly and nods his head in the direction of Worsley Street.

Ten minutes later, the two men are sitting together at a small table in the rearmost private room of the White Lion. Flanagan is dribbling hot water into his brandy and O'Connor is watching. He has his notebook out on the table and a pencil in his hand.

'You're wondering what I'm doing here, I'll bet,' Flanagan says. 'Wondering why I didn't stay in my nice warm bed, or go along to Mass with all the others.'

'Someone sent you, I expect. Told you to report back.'

Flanagan sniffs and shakes his head.

'Not so,' he says. 'I'm here under my own recognisance. I'm not a man to be bound by the rules, you know that, Mr O'Connor. I like to blaze my own particular path, don't I?'

O'Connor nods. That is how Flanagan likes to justify his various betrayals, so it is best not to quibble. He is a vain and trivial fellow, but he is well-trusted by the Manchester Fenians and in among the general nonsense he talks, there is sometimes a gobbet or two of usable truth.

'So a sight-seeing trip then, is it?'

Flanagan frowns and looks suddenly solemn, as if the quip is in poor taste.

'I wanted to be near them at the very end,' he says, 'or as near as I could be. I've known Michael Larkin for a good long time. I know his wife too – Sarah she's called. The others, Allen and O'Brien, were a little hot-headed, a little bit wild, I'll grant you that, but Michael was a good family man. His four poor children orphaned and all for what?'

'They're not the only orphans hereabouts,' O'Connor says.

'What happened with that prison van was just an accident. Everyone knows it. They tried to shoot the lock off the door and the poor bugger Brett got himself in the way, that's all. It was never murder. It never was.'

'It hardly matters now. What's done is done.'

Flanagan shakes his head.

'It matters to the fellows I know,' he says. 'Oh, it matters very much indeed to them fellows.'

He pauses, blows the steam off his brandy and takes a delicate sip.

'It's a nice wee drop, that one,' he says, 'and I thank you for it, Mr O'Connor.'

'So they're angered,' O'Connor says. 'But is the anger likely to lead to anything else?'

'It'll lead to plenty, to plenty. I hear there are grand plans afoot.'

'What plans are they?'

'That I don't know, but I know they're fucken big.'

O'Connor doesn't answer. The plans he hears about from men like Flanagan are always big, yet it's rare that anything much comes of them.

'There's a man being brought over specially from America, I hear,' Flanagan says. 'A soldier from the war.'

'What's this man's name?'

'I don't know his name. I just know he's being brought over specially from America.'

'Where's he coming from in America, New York?'

Flanagan shrugs.

'Could be New York. Could be Chicago. He's here to wreak some havoc, that's what they say.'

'I've not heard of anyone coming over from America. No one else has mentioned it to me.'

'That's because they don't know about it. He's a secret.'

'Without a name, that's not worth anything,' O'Connor says.

'I'm telling you what I know. He's sent here to take revenge for the hangings, show the world that we're not weakened or afraid.'

'If you don't know his name it's most likely he doesn't exist. He's just an idea in someone's head.'

'He exists all right. They're being extra careful with it, that's all. They're wary of spies.'

O'Connor nods, then licks his pencil and writes a sentence in his notebook.

'So you better watch yourself,' he says.

Flanagan shrugs again. O'Connor stands up and puts a coin on the table.

'Get yourself another brandy,' he says. 'If you learn that name or anything else of value, you know whereabouts to find me.'

Flanagan pockets the coin and nods his thanks.

'Did you see poor Michael wriggling there at the end, Mr O'Connor?' he asks. 'Did you see it? Wasn't that a terrible fucken sight? Just terrible. Can you imagine what the man was going through dangling half dead and half alive on the end of that rope with his wrists and ankles all bound? It's a shame and disgrace if you ask me. No one deserves to die like that. To have the very life dragged out of them in public, for all to see.'

'Calcraft doesn't know his trade. He's an oaf. They'd replace him tomorrow if they could, but no one wants to be a hangman these days. Who would?'

Flanagan thinks on this a moment.

'I'd consider the job myself if they ever asked,' he says. 'Why not? If the money was right.'

O'Connor looks down at him quickly, then shakes his head.

'It's the bottom end of the rope I'd worry about most if I were you, Tommy Flanagan,' he says, 'not the top.'