

THE OLD FARMHOUSE

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THE TWO STORY farmhouse looked like no one had lived in it for years. The faded blue sash window frames were rotting, and the old panelled front door had been patched with plywood. A heavy cloak of ivy clung protectively to the walls - as if the house itself was trying to hide its decrepit shame. In truth, no one had ever stayed there long enough to make it look like a home.

Sure, Tom Gerrity had heard the rumours. Looking at the old house nestled amongst the lonely countryside, he could almost imagine how on a windy, rainy day like today, a superstitious mind could come to the conclusion that a place like this might keep being abandoned for a good reason.

None of that concerned Tom. He hadn't made his fortune in property by overlooking a bargain. And to be fair, this place had potential. With a reasonable investment he thought, he could quickly realise a tidy profit. Indeed, it was a familiar feeling - one that he had grown accustomed to over the years, as he built a successful property portfolio the length and breadth of Ireland.

It wasn't always a happy feeling. Tom was a driven man and he had sacrificed a lot in the pursuit of material wealth. He'd made enemies along the way. As a younger man he'd relished a fight, and it hadn't always bothered him that some of the properties he'd bought had been people's homes taken against their will. As the light began to fade, he began to reflect now, in the evening of his life, whether it had been worth the bile of

those who had lost as he gained.

No, what did it matter he mused. He had made his money, and now, through a cloud of cigarette smoke he could see his next potential pay cheque at the end of the laneway.

As he shut the door behind, Tom hesitated. In the course of his business he'd been in more empty houses than most, and they often held an atmosphere that betrayed a hint of the people who had once lived there. He always put it down to a general impression from things like the choice of wallpaper, or the style of floor covering, but somehow on this occasion things felt different.

The house gave every impression of being unwelcoming - old newspapers and books lay scattered on the otherwise bare living room floor, dampened by wet air being blown through a hole in a window pane. Outside, overgrown nettles rustled menacingly against the glass.

Making his way upstairs, he entered the nearest bedroom and began to fix his stare down the laneway to where his car was parked. Becoming lost in his thoughts, time seemed to slow. Suddenly realising how dark it was now getting, he turned to make his way across the room and towards the stairs.

Just as he started down the stairs, he noticed someone in the shadows staring at him from across the landing. 'Oh, I didn't hear you come in', said Tom. 'Were you waiting for me to leave?' The owner had said on the phone he would leave the old property unlocked for him to look around, and perhaps now he had come back to lock up. The figure

didn't answer, but nodded. From under the man's cap he thought he could make out the face of someone in their late thirties. His style of clothing looked somewhat odd, almost old fashioned.

'You know, when I started up the laneway earlier, I began to imagine how the stories about this place could be true', Tom laughed nervously. Again the figure just nodded. But this time his expression had changed, he thought he looked angry. Perhaps, he was creating an inconvenience by keeping the man waiting.

'Well, I'll be off, I'll call tomorrow to make further arrangements', he said. By now he had begun to feel a little uneasy with the man's silence, and in an attempt to lighten the mood took one final look back to wish the owner a final farewell.

He was in a state of shock - the man was nowhere to be seen. In the blink of an eye he had vanished, and by now Tom too wanted to disappear as fast as he could out the door, to the relative safety of his car.

Perhaps the stories had been true. Hearing how an inheritance dispute over the house in the forties had led to the mysterious disappearance of one of two brothers; he was able to understand more than most, how the pursuit of property had the potential to be destructive.

Indeed, he now had reason to speculate whether it could even lead to the loss of life, or worse, the loss of your precious soul.

Tom never did complete the purchase.