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Little Criminals

Gene Kerrigan

LITTLE CRIMINALS

After seven non-fiction books, veteran journalist Gene Kerrigan received critical acclaim in Ireland, the UK and the USA for his first two novels, *Little Criminals* and *The Midnight Choir*. His most recent novel is *Dark Times in the City*. He lives in Dublin.

About the Book

This is a terrific novel, tense and exciting. I spun through it quicker than it takes to tell ... tremendous'

Independent on Sunday

'He writes with a light touch that makes his darker final chapters all the more disturbing' *Daily Telegraph*

Justin and Angela Kennedy have money, love, children and a limitless future. Jo-Jo Mackendrick is a pillar of Dublin gangland society; a man determined that nothing will endanger his hard-earned supremacy. Into their lives comes Frankie Crowe, an ambitious criminal tired of risking his life for small change. Kidnap could be the first step on his climb to a better life, and he knows just the kind of dangerous men to make it happen...

'A great writer, a great story, relentless and brilliant' Roddy Doyle

'A savage X-ray picture of contemporary Ireland... beautifully etched characters' *Guardian*

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GENE KERRIGAN

Little Criminals

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This is for my daughter,
Cathleen Kerrigan

From where he lay, with only the light from the street lamp outside his flat, Stephen Beckett could see the gun on the bedside table. The Colt .45 pistol rested on the red and white hand towel, level with his gaze. Old and worn, big, grey and ugly.

A bit like me.

It was some time after two o'clock. If he didn't get some sleep, it wouldn't matter what he decided in the morning. He wouldn't have the strength to hold the gun, let alone use it.

He closed his eyes, but that didn't help, his mind was still full of the gun and all it meant.

He opened his eyes and forced himself to turn over on to his back. The tiredness seemed to have hollowed out his bones. Some fool drove by too fast and the roar of the engine was accompanied by a pattern of light gliding across the ceiling.

It has to be done.

After he'd come to bed and spent most of an hour thinking about what he had to do, he tried to push his mind on to something else, in the hope that he might drift off to sleep. No chance. There was no other thought strong enough to gain space in his head. This thing crowded out everything else in the world and he knew that was a mark of how messed up he was.

The little fucker.

There were people who took short cuts through other people's lives, didn't give a damn what harm they did. Sometimes, what mattered wasn't just the damage they left after them, it was the reckless contempt of it. It's like some lives matter and other people exist just to populate the landscape.

It has to be done.

Stephen Beckett had lived too long to mistake this urge for anything other than what it was – the need for revenge. At any other time of his life, he might have found a reason to step back. Now, the way things were, his sense of caution was feeble and there were more important things than right and wrong. Stuff like that belonged in another life, before the shooting began.

1

The shooting began in the small town of Harte's Cross, a few minutes after ten o'clock one chilly summer morning. At first, only a few people knew there was anything wrong, and they were all in Sweeney's Pub.

The pub owner was pleading for her life. She was a small-town throwback, aged about fifty, wearing heavy spectacles and settled into her plumpness, with the hair and the clothes of her mother's generation. She hardly saw Frankie Crowe standing in front of her. Instead her gaze was fastened to the big black gun in his hand.

'Please, mister,' she said. Frankie Crowe was twenty-eight.

Frankie Crowe had a Homer Simpson baseball cap pulled down low on his forehead, a large pair of thick-rimmed glasses hiding the shape of his face. Under his bulky beige anorak, he might have been thin or fat or anything in between. The large automatic he was holding was pointed at no one in particular, but it was the centre of attention.

There was just the one barman on duty, just as Leo had said there would be. And he was no problem. Hands flat on the counter, carefully avoiding eye contact with Frankie Crowe.

Of the three customers in the pub, two were sitting in a booth across from the bar, old men with faces the colour of stale porridge. One of the wrinklies, a pinch-mouthed little man with a stained and misshapen felt hat, had his arms

held rigidly above his head, not that Crowe had given him any instructions. The old man knew, from the Bogart movies he'd seen more than half a century ago, that that's what you do when someone pulls out a gun.

The other man was bigger and well built, with a slight stoop to his back that disguised his height. One hand cradled a teacup as he stared at the gunman without emotion.

The third customer was a young woman with very short black hair, a ring through her left eyebrow and a baby held in a sling on her chest. She was sitting at a table near the window, her own coffee and the baby's half-empty bottle in front of her. When she saw Frankie Crowe come in with a gun in his hand she stood up and made for the door, but Frankie just shook his head and used his gun hand to wave her back to the table. The woman sat down, one arm supporting the baby's sling.

She didn't even see Martin Paxton, standing just inside the door, a dark baseball hat worn low on his forehead, a handgun held down by his leg, until Frankie said, 'Keep an eye,' and took the pub owner into the office behind the bar.

Nothing complicated, Frankie said. In and out and back home to Dublin with a rake of money, maybe fifteen grand, before anyone knows we've been there. Not the kind of take that would make a difference, but enough to keep things ticking over.

It was a Monday morning. 'Saturday night, they make a bundle, Sunday too,' Leo Titley said. Leo was the tip-off. 'The icing on the cake is, Saturday night coming up they have a concert. Old man Sweeney, before he died, bought out the kip next door, broke through, fixed it up with a stage. They do a gig every month or so and it takes maybe five hundred punters.'

'The bank has a night safe?'

‘None,’ Leo Titley said. ‘That’s the beauty of it. They lodge the takings next day. Mrs S does it herself, noon on the dot. Local cop walks her down the street. Guy I know used to work there a few years back, said there’s a safe in the back room. Two nights’ takings and the gig money, waiting to be banked Monday morning.’

And the great thing about the gig, Leo said, was it was nothing special. If it was a name act, there’d be advance booking. This was all money at the door. A couple of losers from a boy band that never happened. It broke up and three of them went back to scratching their arses, the other two were earning peanuts hawking their out-of-tune cover versions around the provincial pub circuit.

‘Money at the door. The pubs love it, taxman never sees a cent.’

And Monday morning, before they can get the cash into the bank, Frankie Crowe and Martin Paxton are sitting in the pub car park in a stolen Primera.

‘The pub opens at ten thirty,’ Leo said. ‘You go in, wave a gun and the safe opens.’

That was the plan.

The old bitch’s legs were trembling when she came out of the back room, so Frankie gave her a shove to hurry her up. The woman moved as fast as she could, putting the counter between herself and Frankie.

‘Time lock, she says,’ Frankie said.

Martin made a pissed-off noise and hit the door with the butt of his gun.

‘Says she can’t open it for another hour and a half. She’s bullshitting.’ He pointed his gun at the barman, his hands still flat on the counter. ‘You know the combination?’

The man swallowed, shook his head. He was wearing a short red waistcoat that showed his white shirt bunched up

at the top of his trousers. His voice was thin, like he was squeezing the words out through his fear. 'She's telling the truth. She got the new safe last year, couple of young fellas broke in one night, nearly got the back off the old one.' He looked at Frankie as if he was judging how his story was going over. 'Can't be opened until twelve o'clock. That's when the garda comes, to keep an eye while she's banking it.'

'Bollocks.'

Frankie looked at Martin and said, 'Old bitch is lying, this cunt too.'

'Please, mister! For the love of God, this is all there is!' The woman had the register open and was holding up a handful of notes.

She held the money out towards Frankie. When he got within reach he knocked the money out of her hand and grabbed the front of her blouse. She closed her eyes as he screamed in her face. *'Open the fucking safe!'*

The young woman with the baby made soothing sounds and cradled her bundle in front of her. Its head tilted sideways, the baby stared with frank interest at the angry man and his colourful hat.

Over at the door, Martin Paxton said, 'Ah shit,' then he leaned back against the door, opening it slightly. 'Come on,' he said. He waited, and when Frankie ignored him he pushed the door open and walked out.

Crowe shouted, *'Bitch!'* and let go of the woman's blouse. She was close to passing out, sweat rising on her forehead and along her quivering upper lip.

The tall elderly man who hadn't raised his hands had a loud voice. 'Leave her alone, you. Leave her alone.'

Crowe turned and saw an old fool, a hillbilly with big, gnarled hands, untidy hair and a face pitted with time.

The old guy stood up. 'Coming down here, waving a gun. Why don't you work for your money, the same as the rest of us?'

Crowe looked at him like the old man was a peculiar species he hadn't yet come across. He walked slowly towards the booth, until he was no more than two or three feet from the old man. 'Who the fuck're you, grandad? Sir Galahad?' He pointed the gun at the old man's crotch. The hillbilly tried desperately not to flinch. Crowe grinned.

'You have balls, grandad. You want to keep them?'

The old man stared. Beside him, still sitting, raised hands trembling, his small friend kept his gaze fixed on the surface of the table in front of him. Frankie made a dismissive sound and turned back to the pub owner. 'It's make your mind up time.' He pointed the gun at her head and his voice was casual. 'One, two—'

The shooting came at the end of a period - more than a year - in which a lot of things didn't quite work out. By now, Frankie Crowe and Martin Paxton were supposed to be on their way somewhere. Instead, they were here in a small town in County Meath, still scrounging for the rent.

The town's kids were at school, the farmers and their labourers were off in the countryside doing whatever farmers do. It was mostly women shopping, and mostly elderly women, that were to be seen on the streets that morning. There was a drinks lorry delivering a palletload to Harte's Cross's only hotel. A couple of old lads squinting at yesterday's results in the window of a bookie's. A limping man pushing a Calor gas cylinder in a child's buggy. Two dogs being walked by a white-haired old woman in a scarlet tracksuit.

And one cop.

The garda was standing alongside a car about twenty yards down the street from Sweeney's Pub, chatting up a young woman.

He hadn't been there when they arrived. Now, Martin Paxton got into the Primera in Sweeney's car park and kept an eye on him.

The cop had a Boy Scout face. Uniform a little on the loose side. He was watching the woman's backside as she leaned into the car to drape a collection of dry-cleaned clothes across the back seat. Paxton smiled. Naughty boy. The woman, it seemed to Paxton, was too pretty and too sure of herself for a chinless wonder of a culchie cop fresh out of Templemore. She sat halfway into the driver's seat, smiling, nodding, idly touching the ends of her loose blonde hair as the garda leaned on the car and rabbited away at her.

Across the street, in the window of a clothes shop, a shop assistant was fitting a flowery summer dress to a mannequin. The shop, like the MegaMarket and the petrol station halfway down the street, belonged to the pub owner's family.

A mud-spattered tractor chugged past, towing a trailer from which dripped a steady trail of something dark, green and smelly.

Two elderly women, all headscarves, knowing eyes and fluttering lips, stood outside Tubridy's newsagent's, dispensing more gossip than any combination of the trashy magazines on the shelves inside.

Most people within hearing range paid little attention to the first shot. It was a flat smack of sound that could have been several things. Martin Paxton looked to the mirror and saw the garda push himself away from the woman's car and glance around, unsure of himself.

Not even the boy copper could mistake the second shot for something else.

Somewhere in the distance, there was the sound of someone screaming.

The garda moved into the middle of the street, looking up and down, trying to decide what to do, knowing that civilians nearby were looking in his direction. The woman he'd been talking to swivelled round in her seat and pulled the door of the car shut.

Martin Paxton started the engine of the Primera and waited.

Inside Sweeney's Pub, one of the owner's hands was clasped across her mouth, the other was holding on to her hair. Her eyes were closed, her lips tight, her breathing fast. There was a bullet hole in the Guinness mirror behind the counter. A second bullet had shattered the display screen of the cash register.

The barman was bent forward, hands on the counter, head to one side, as though he was determined not to see whatever happened next. There was a burning smell in the air.

The woman with the baby had turned her back and was cowering, putting the slender width of her body between the gun and her child. The small pinch-faced old man with his hands up had pissed himself, leaving a big dark patch all down his white trousers. The ballsy old hillbilly had raised his hands.

Frankie Crowe fired three more shots - one into the wide-screen television set high up on the end wall of the pub, two more into a second screen in an alcove. Another two bullets hit an electronic quiz machine. The eighth shattered a bottle of vodka a foot from the pub owner's head.

Crowe made a noise of disgust. She was out of it, so far into fear that she was beyond threats. Besides, what was the fucking point? She had to be telling the truth.

Crowe picked up the banknotes from where the old bitch had dropped them on the counter. As he reached the pub door, he put the money and his gun into his anorak pockets, made sure Homer Simpson was firmly in place, then he opened the door and stepped outside.

After the second shot, the two gossips shuffled into the newsagent's, glancing back as they went, already shaping the anecdotes they would harvest from the drama.

The garda had decided he knew where the shots had come from. He began running towards Sweeney's Pub. He was into the car park when he heard the second flurry of shots. He stopped ten feet from the stolen Primera. Martin Paxton tugged his baseball hat so the peak was shading his face, opened the door and got out of the car. He held the gun casually down by his side.

The garda looked from the pub to Martin Paxton. The gunman just shook his head.

The door of the pub opened and Frankie Crowe came out.

He stopped just outside the door and used the index finger of one hand to rub his nose, the hand partly obscuring his face.

The garda was a riot of uncertainty. No obvious course of action was acceptable. Do something - that was stupid. Do nothing, Jesus -

End up with the lads at the station calling him a fucking eejit for having a go, or a no-balls coward for being sensible? He knew that right now heroics were dangerous and pointless. He knew too that if he backed down, no

matter how long he lived there would never be a day when a part of him didn't squirm at the memory.

Frankie Crowe walked as though he was setting out on a stroll to see the town sights. He stopped a yard away from the garda.

The thing to do, Garda Joe Hanlon knew, was to play it cool. Do nothing to give the thug a reason to use the gun. Take everything in – the face, the build, distinguishing marks, the other one standing by the car. Get the number as they drive off. Take it all in, survive, watch them run, then deal with them. Branches all over, he used to joke – outfit I work for, we've got branches all over.

Garda Joe Hanlon held his chin up.

Across the street, in the window of the clothes shop, the shop assistant stood as still and as pale as the mannequin she was dressing.

The thug was smiling. 'Morning, garda. Soft day, thank God.'

The thug held the gun up, moved a finger and the magazine dropped from the handle into his other hand. He held the garda's gaze as he put the empty magazine into a pocket and took out a new one. Garda Hanlon heard it click into place.

'You from around these parts?' the thug said. He had a Dublin accent. He was holding the gun down by his side now, as though to put the garda at ease.

'You know there's nothing I can do.' Garda Hanlon was surprised that his voice carried no tremor of the dread he felt. 'Just take whatever you got and fuck off out of here.'

He didn't see the thug squeeze the trigger.

For a moment, there was nothing inside his head except the sound of the gun going off. It was like the biggest door

in the universe slammed shut an inch from his ear. Then his mind was flooded with panic.

No, please wait—

The garda realised he hadn't been shot. The thug was still holding the gun down by his side. He'd fired into the tarmac surface of the car park. The garda was already turning, and in seconds he was fifty feet away, his head still echoing with the gun's explosion. When he stopped and looked back, the gunman was standing there, gun poised.

Garda Hanlon reached up and touched his bare head. He hadn't noticed his cap fall off, but it was there on the pavement just outside Sweeney's car park.

'Frankie, for fuck sake!'

Martin Paxton lurched in behind the wheel of the Primera. Frankie was walking towards the garda now, big smile on his face. The garda backed away, turned and ran a little more, then looked round and stopped.

Martin watched Frankie pick up the garda's cap. Frankie walked slowly back towards the car. He threw the garda's cap into the back seat, climbed inside and took off the thick-rimmed glasses. It was like the anger had been diluted by the shooting. He smiled. 'Whenever you're ready.'

Paxton revved the car and drove across the car park, towards the exit. He saw the garda turning and running fast down the street.

Frankie Crowe was looking towards the pub. The old hillbilly who had challenged him was standing in the doorway. Crowe lifted the baseball hat in salute and smiled.

2

It was a gift, an ability to close his eyes and immediately drop off to sleep, and an instant clarity on waking. Justin Kennedy was sitting in his favourite chair, in his living room, it was late evening and his wife and two children were asleep upstairs. His briefcase and his jacket were on the sofa, carelessly thrown there when he had arrived home. The vodka and tonic he'd poured sat on the side table, untouched. He'd surrendered to the tiredness, collapsed into the chair, let the drowsiness take him for a few minutes. Now, his mind clear, he looked around the room. From where he was sitting, everything he could see spoke of quality. The furniture solid, the walls expensively embellished, there was an unmistakable balance to the room. It was mostly Angela's doing, her and that fruit she'd hired.

Justin dipped a finger in the drink, put the cold tip of the finger to his tongue. He lifted the glass and took as much pleasure in the weight of the crystal as he did in the sip of vodka.

He enjoyed this. The late-night working, the tiredness, the knowledge that he was stretching himself to the limit at work and had a place of comfort to which he could return.

He watched a drop of moisture fall from the glass on to the dark cloth of his suit trousers. He smoothed the damp spot into the material. Justin's business suits were mostly Ermenegildo Zegna, but he had recently ordered a suit from Brioni. It was his normal friend Daragh who put him

on to Brioni. It cost maybe three times as much, but that wasn't the point. 'It's not about fashion,' he told Justin, 'and it's not about showing off. It's about positioning yourself in the market.'

At forty-one, when the first millimetres of grey had recently appeared, Justin had his hair touched up to match his natural dark brown. Laser treatment allowed him to dispense with glasses, but that, he was convinced, made the puffiness under his eyes more noticeable. He had a pair of clear-glass spectacles made, but he felt foolish and wore them only once.

For a while, he regarded the unmistakably inflated belly that softly pushed out over his belt as a correctable failure of discipline. As time went by, he'd come to think of it as an acceptable indulgence of his prosperity. The secondary chin that had gradually accumulated over the previous few years was more of a worry. Mostly when he looked in the mirror he unconsciously edited out such blemishes and noticed only a slightly older version of the handsome striver he had seen in his youth. Over the past year, however, he had winced at occasional photographs in the business pages of the newspapers, and at social-page snaps of his appearances at a couple of charity events. He worked out a little at home, but lacked the necessary discipline. He signed up with a gym but after three weeks of early-morning sessions he decided he couldn't spare the time. It was a problem that strayed into his thoughts with increasing frequency.

He let the ice touch his lips and took another sip of the vodka, then he put the glass down carefully and made a satisfied sound as he pulled himself to his feet. Upstairs, he looked in first on Luke, then on Saskia, both fast asleep, before entering his own bedroom. His wife had fallen asleep with the bedside lamp on. A hardback book, one of her reading-group novels, was open beside her on the

pillow. In her sleep she had shrugged off the duvet and he stood there a moment, looking down at her with approval and pride.

Succulent.

It was a word he would never use to anyone else about Angela – and certainly not to her – but it was the word that came to mind when he first saw her, and when he first took her to bed, and at the steps of the altar as he was about to marry her ten years back. Now, the word came to him again, as he evaluated his sleeping wife.

She was eleven years younger than he and although these days he could see a slight creasing under the eyes, it was still a face that drew admiring glances wherever they went. Her dark brown shoulder-length hair had recently been cut shorter than he preferred, but not troublesomely so. Her breasts, slightly on the small side, were the precise shape and weight of the idealised breasts that had most readily stirred his libido since puberty. She was long and lithe and toned and he didn't begrudge the annual gym fees that ensured she stayed that way.

When they'd met, her job in PR required her to spend a certain amount of time and money maintaining an appearance. Throughout their marriage, the budget for what she called 'upkeep' was agreed without negotiation. Angela was on his books as an assistant, so most of it could be written off.

Succulent.

As he gently pulled the cover over her, Angela stirred and said something he didn't catch. He whispered, 'Night, love,' and switched off her lamp.

Just over two hundred, it came out as. *Fuck sake.*

Frankie Crowe was still angry about it next morning, still doing a bit of pacing in the small living room of Leo

Titley's cottage. It was a combined living room and dining room, cramped, with a dining table in the centre. It reminded Frankie of the poky little living room of the house he'd grown up in in Finglas.

'Wanker,' he muttered, when the door closed behind Leo. They were a couple of miles from Harte's Cross, at the isolated farmhouse where Leo lived alone. It made sense to torch the Primera and go to ground locally. It meant sleeping overnight in lumpy armchairs in Leo's manky cottage, and eating his greasy food, but they could take their time travelling back to Dublin, instead of making the journey while the Meath bluebottles were agitated by the robbery.

Repeatedly, Frankie ran his hand back and forth through his curly black hair. He was medium height and he was fit without being obviously muscular. His even features were diminished by a permanently querulous expression.

He had done a couple of things with Leo in the dim and distant and it was Leo's urging that had brought them to Harte's Cross. A hatful of money, he said, no security worth talking about. What he didn't say was, no fucking money worth talking about.

Frankie did a bit of roaring and shouting when they got back to Leo's place after the balls-up, then Martin said it was their own fault. Do a quickie, no checking, you take your chances. Frankie snorted. The knowledge that Martin was right didn't help.

'I've got some whiskey,' Leo said, as though that might help. Frankie waved a hand. No booze. That was a Frankie Crowe rule. Keep a sober head until you're well clear of trouble. Celebrate when it's over.

Not that there was anything to celebrate. It wasn't like they'd been expecting a fortune, but *two fucking hundred*.

This morning, Leo was on his way into Harte's Cross, to see if things had settled down, and if it looked OK the others would take off and be back in Dublin by lunchtime.

'Risking everything,' Frankie said, 'for beer money.'

Martin Paxton was a tall man in jeans and a Manchester United shirt, almost thirty and already balding. He was soft-voiced and gave an impression of rounded edges. Whenever he had to lie about what he did for a living he said, 'Software,' and he looked the part. When he did occasional straight work it was mostly chasing and plastering for his electrician brother. Doing that, he could put in the best part of a day for a couple of hundred into his hand.

Paxton said, 'OK, it's not the Crown jewels, we'll have a go at them next week.'

'Smart-arse.'

By the time Leo came back from Harte's Cross to say the coast was clear, Frankie had decided there was no point splitting two fucking hundred. He left it with Leo.

On the road to Dublin, in the anonymity of the heavy traffic, Frankie said, 'I never want to see that wanker again.' From behind the wheel, he looked across at Martin. 'Risking our lives for loose change. Fuck sake, this is no way to be.'

Martin Paxton knew the rest of the routine. Starting with *We're not kids any more*, moving into *It's there to be taken*, and finishing on something like *All we need is the balls*. He'd been hearing it from Frankie at least twice a week for the past three months.

Martin Paxton had known Frankie Crowe for over twenty years. They grew up on the same housing estate, mitched from the same school, got into trouble on the same streets, and met again when they were doing time in Mountjoy. And there was never a time when Frankie didn't

have notions. 'There's moochers and there's doers,' he used to say. 'Moochers take shit. Moochers don't know they're alive.'

Over the past few months, the ambition had taken shape. You could hear it in Frankie's tone.

'It'll always be this way, unless we do something about it. You keep putting things off, what happens - you wake up one day your arse is dragging on the floor, you're still living on loose change and it's too late to do anything except crawl into the coffin.' He poked a finger at Martin. 'Or, you pick a target, put a price on it, do the big one.'

'You know how long you get in the funny house for kidnapping?'

'If you get caught. And you get caught because you dawdle - way I want to do it, there'll be no dawdling.'

Three days later, Frankie was talking like it was all agreed.

'Just the two of us?' Martin said.

'Three, four maybe. Dolly Finn if he's up for it, maybe Brendan Sweetman.'

Martin nodded, then he said, 'Something like that, it's not just the cops we have to worry about.'

Crowe tapped his chest. 'Leave Jo-Jo to me. He owes me. Big time. Jo-Jo's cool.'

Martin Paxton reckoned there wasn't much point in arguing. This was where Frankie was headed. And the way things were, cutting loose from Frankie Crowe and striking out on his own wasn't an option. There wasn't much point heading into this kidnap thing with half a heart.

'You got the target picked out?'

'It's down to four or five,' Frankie said. 'Eeny, meeny, miney, mo.'

3

Brendan Sweetman knew that the chubby blonde's name was Nina and that she was a brunette in a wig. That afternoon, she was with two other women in their late thirties. They were fashionably dressed, and had all put a lot of work into their hair. Each carried a large handbag. Sweetman didn't recognise the other two women, but seeing as they were with Nina, there was no doubt they too were shoplifters.

In the four hours since Sweetman came on security duty at noon, he'd already refused entry to eight people he knew to be strokers. He stepped away from the shop door, shifted his chewing gum from one cheek to the other and held his hands up and wide. 'Sorry, Nina, not today, love.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Piss off, Nina, take a hike.' He grinned. With her hooked nose and her over-plucked eyebrows, the poor cow was unmistakable, no matter what she wore on her head. The days when she'd get away with stuffing other people's merchandise down her jeans were few and far between.

'How dare you! Who d'you think you're talking to?'

'On your bike, Nina.'

'I want to see the manager!'

Sweetman's smile broadened. 'Go on, Nina. You're sussed. Take it like a lady and fuck off quietly.'

All three of the women erupted in obscenities. Brendan Sweetman didn't take it personally. As they snarled at him,

he stared in turn at the two he didn't know, imprinting their faces on his memory. The three walked away. Until they rounded the corner into the main street, they took turns hurling the usual curses back at him.

Sweetman was in his mid-thirties. He'd worked the front of one store or another in the city centre on and off for almost five years, and for the past year he'd been full-time at it. Some security personnel found it boring, standing around for hours, using their walkie-talkies to share info and dirty jokes with neighbouring bouncers, using their mobile phones to text friends, or just shuffling their feet and chewing gum. Brendan Sweetman loved the job. Some of the thieves waited until near closing time, knowing the bouncers were likely to be tired, bored and inattentive. Brendan Sweetman was as lively at five minutes to six as he was when his workday started.

Hair cut so tight it was little more than a shadow, he was short and wide and made up in bulk what he lacked in height. He tended towards plain black T-shirts along with plain black trousers that he had made by a tailor in Ringsend. Although he was eligible for staff discounts, the shops he protected didn't sell much in Sweetman's size. Jeans big enough to go around his waist were several inches too long for his legs, and had to be taken up at the ends. Shirts that accommodated his neck had sleeves too long for his arms. Much of his bulk was muscle, and few who came across him dared make any of the obvious fat jokes in his hearing. No one had ever done it twice.

The idiot two doors down was jabbering into his radio again. 'The tart in the yellow top, look at the tits on that!'

Brendan Sweetman didn't reply. That kind of unprofessional carry-on, passers-by could hear shit like that, it gave the business a bad name. He'd just spotted Frankie Crowe standing with his back to a nearby shop window. Frankie mimed drinking a pint and Brendan