

One Year

CHAPTER 1

Mary Bernadette and Paddy Fitzgibbon had lived at 19 Honey-suckle Lane in the town of Oliver's Well, Virginia, for most of their married life. The town had been founded by a small band of English settlers in 1632, including one Noah Oliver, who had gone on to become its first elected official. The reason the town was called Oliver's Well and not Oliver's Landing or Oliver's Town, was lost to time. Presumably, Noah Oliver had had some doings with a well.

Over the almost four centuries of its existence, the town had grown to support a current population of almost three thousand people. There was a public grammar, middle, and high school, as well as a private academy. There was a community center, with a full kitchen for potluck suppers and an auditorium where the local amateur theatre group performed its plays. There was a library and an old-fashioned single-screen movie theatre. Small, locally owned businesses—hair salon, florist, dress shop, restaurants, jeweler—flourished alongside the branches of two area banks and an insurance company. The Oliver's Well Memorial Hospital was well regarded. The post office was a daily gathering place for the dissemination of gossip. There were no fast-food franchises or tattoo parlors.

In many ways, Oliver's Well was typical of any charming, historic American town, but many would argue that it had a unique appeal. Mrs. Fitzgibbon would be the most vocal and persuasive of those. At the age of twenty-one, Mary Bernadette, nee Lehane, had arrived in Oliver's Well from her native Ireland via New York City. Though the promised personal connection—the uncle of a friend of a friend—and the housekeeping job he was

supposed to have provided her did not materialize, Mary Bernadette had decided to stay in Oliver's Well and make her way, liking what she saw of the quaint little town. There was little, if anything, that could deter her when she had decided on a goal. One of those goals was to marry the handsome and ambitious twenty-three-year-old factory worker named Paddy Fitzgibbon who she had met at the Church of the Immaculate Conception one bright Sunday morning.

Now, fifty-four years later, Mary Bernadette and her husband were getting ready to preside over New Year's Day festivities, surrounded by their family.

"Paddy," Mary Bernadette said from the door to the living room. "The garbage disposal is frozen again."

"I'll see to it," he replied, getting up from the armchair in which he was reading the day's edition of the *Oliver's Well Gazette*.

"And do it before your son arrives and tries to help you."

Paddy chuckled and followed his wife into the kitchen. "He means well, Mary. He just didn't inherit my handyman skills."

"Which is why I'll never understand why he always insists on 'giving things a go.'"

Paddy retrieved the tool he used when some bit of plastic wrap or chicken bone had managed to slip down the drain and cause the garbage disposal to grind to a halt.

"It was good to talk to Grace earlier, wasn't it, Mary?" he said, opening the cabinet below the sink for access to the works.

"It was," Mary Bernadette agreed. "We don't see enough of our daughter. And I wish she would call more often."

"Grace is a very busy woman. She does what she can."

Grace Marie Fitzgibbon—so called after her maternal grandmother, Mary Grace—was a nun in the small and highly unorthodox Order of Saint Prisca, Virgin Martyr. For those who wanted to know, Grace was happy to relate that Saint Prisca had met her grisly death in 270 CE. Paddy affectionately called Grace "our rebel," and indeed, her politics were as far removed from those of her parents as it was possible for them to be. Currently she was stationed in Los Angeles, though in past years she had been

posted to Central and South America, or, as Mary Bernadette put it, the ends of the earth. “And what is your New Year’s resolution?” Mary Bernadette had asked her daughter that morning, to which Grace had replied, “To speak the truth and shame the Devil. To rage against injustice.” Well, that was Sister Grace for you.

It had been so many years now, Mary Bernadette thought, watching her husband tinkering away, since their children had lived under the roof of the house on Honeysuckle Lane. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, it was a handsome white clapboard structure with stark black shutters and a stately brick chimney. There were two floors, on the first of which could be found a living room, dining room, and kitchen, as well as a small room once used as a study and now as an extra bedroom, and finally a powder room that Paddy had added many years previously. On the second floor were a full bathroom and three bedrooms. In addition to a cottage behind the house, where Mary Bernadette and Paddy’s grandson lived with his wife, there was a two-car garage and a garden shed on the property.

“Almost done,” Paddy said, his voice muffled by the fact that the upper half of his body was inside the cabinet.

Mary Bernadette peered through the window over the sink, from where she could clearly see the cottage. “I wonder where PJ is,” she said. “I thought he’d be here by now.”

“I’m sure our grandson and his wife will be along at any moment.”

Yes, Mary Bernadette thought. If Alexis wasn’t dawdling. She was a good girl but had her faults like most, one of which, in Mary Bernadette’s opinion, was a tendency to waste time. It was not a fault Mary Bernadette shared.

Now in her midseventies Mary Bernadette was still a striking woman. Her thick, snowy white hair had once been as dark as ink. Her eyes were still a clear blue, and she only wore glasses for close reading. For the New Year’s Day celebration she had put on one of her favorite dresses, a dark blue wool A-line with a narrow, black patent leather belt at the waist. She was wearing the strand of pearls Paddy had given her on their fortieth anniversary, a pair

of small pearl earrings left to her by her aunt Catherine, and her simple gold wedding band. The impression Mary Bernadette made upon virtually everyone she met—whether in her capacity as chairman of the Oliver’s Well Historical Association or simply as a congregant at church—was one of power and elegance, competency and resolve. And when she smiled her famously dazzling smile, people were almost universally smitten. Mary Bernadette was aware of all this and took the attention she was paid as a matter of course.

“There, all fixed.” Paddy emerged triumphant from under the sink. “I suppose one of these days I should replace the thing with a new one.”

Mary Bernadette refrained from pointing out that he had been threatening a replacement for close to three years. She loved and respected her husband in spite of any shortcomings, which, to be honest, were too few to mention.

The patriarch of the Fitzgibbon clan was slim and wiry, though a hip replacement nine years earlier had left him with a slight hitch in his get along. His eyes were intensely blue. Mary Bernadette still considered him the most handsome man she had ever seen.

Paddy was retired now from Fitzgibbon Landscaping, the company he had founded as a young man, but with his grandson PJ in charge he was able to keep his hand in on a job he had loved. Every other Sunday he served as an usher at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, and he filled in when one of the readers had to be absent. In his leisure hours, he spent time with his friend Danny Kline (Danny’s wife, Jeannette, was Mary Bernadette’s dearest friend). Paddy, an only child who had been orphaned at sixteen, was genuinely well liked in Oliver’s Well and greatly loved by his family. In that way, he had been heard to say, he was the richest man in town.

“Mmmm.” Paddy smiled at his wife. “The dinner smells wonderful.”

“Thank you,” she said. Mary Bernadette was making roast beef (for which, in her opinion, she was justifiably famous), with mashed potatoes, green beans, and homemade rolls. For dessert,

she had baked an apple pie (for which she also believed herself to be justifiably famous) and cookies studded with chocolate chips and bits of candy cane. The cookies would satisfy her grandchildren.

Mary Bernadette went back now to the living room. The Christmas decorations—including a real fir tree densely hung with ornaments and tinsel, a massive wreath made entirely of pinecones, and strings of blue and white lights in the windows—were still in place and would be until the Feast of the Epiphany, after which Mary Bernadette would carefully pack everything away until next holiday season. Her favorite decoration of all was the beautiful handcrafted crèche. It had pride of place on a side table in the living room, atop a blanket of Angel's Hair to represent snow. Mary Bernadette turned the statuette of St. Joseph a little to the right and straightened a camel that was threatening to topple over on his fluffy base. Then she checked to see that the bowls of nuts and ribbon candy and chocolates were still untouched. To assure this, she had covered each bowl with a piece of plastic wrap. It wasn't Banshee's behavior she was worried about. It was Mercy's.

Banshee—currently asleep on one of the armchairs—was Mary Bernadette's ten-year-old Siamese cat. She was long and lean, with lovely hyacinth blue eyes. Mary Bernadette had never told anyone but Paddy that she had purchased Banshee from a breeder in Arlington. She had a well-deserved reputation for frugality, and she did not relish the idea of people—her son, for instance—commenting on this one instance of extravagance. Anyway, intelligent and affectionate Banshee had proved well worth the expense.

Mercy, however . . . Mary Bernadette eyed her husband's shelter dog with a measure of suspicion. The creature, who for the past hours had been roaming the first floor of the house, sniffing at the oven, trying to snatch stray food from the kitchen table, and generally causing havoc, looked like two or more very different dogs randomly stuck together. There was a sort of ruff around her neck, though the rest of her fur was short. Her face was black, the ruff was a mottled white and gray, and her body was a patch-

work of all three colors. Her eyes were ever so slightly crossed, giving her a quizzical expression, which suited her curious personality. Now, this curious personality was prompting her to sniff loudly at the straw in the Holy Family's crèche.

Paddy appeared in the doorway.

"That dog is a menace," Mary Bernadette said, turning to him. "Not even the baby Jesus is safe. Paddy, put her upstairs, won't you." Paddy was ostensibly in charge of the mutt, but while he doted on her and she adored him she never obeyed any of his commands. Mary Bernadette thought her husband's canine rather dim-witted.

"She'll just whine until I let her out, Mary, you know that. Besides, I think Jesus faced worse threats in his life than a dog's wet nose."

Mary Bernadette ignored the vaguely blasphemous comment and checked her watch. "Where is everybody?" she asked. "Dinner is almost ready, and there's nothing I hate worse than to serve a cold meal."

"They'll be here, Mary. They'll be here."

CHAPTER 2

"You know Mom's not going to let me watch the games today. We should have stayed in Annapolis. I swear, I don't know how Dad stands it."

Pat Fitzgibbon was driving Megan's Subaru Outback; Megan was beside him in the passenger seat, and the twins, David and Danica, were in the backseat, each plugged into an electronic device that allowed them to ignore their parents' boring conversations.